theories and methodologies

Marks of Possession: Methods for an Impossible Subject

KAREN SÁNCHEZ-EPPLER

IN HER 1892 STUDY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE, *THE CHILD AND HIS BOOK*, LOUISE FRANCES FIELD COMPLAINS, "THE SUBJECT OF THIS VOLume is one which, from its nature, presents many difficulties as regards material. It is the fate of children's books to be destroyed by children themselves" (v). Of course, the difficulties of children's literature are not only material. Jacqueline Rose's insistence on the "impossibility of children's fiction" has had the salutary effect of keeping scholars warily attuned to how adult desires—from sex to money to politics—structure the genre. Despite the claim of possession housed in that apostrophe, most scholars of children's literature acknowledge that these books don't really belong to children at all (Hunt). My intention in this essay is to use one of these impossibilities to circumvent the other. I am interested in children's own relation to their reading; I strive to understand not just the books adults produced for children—that is, what adults thought about childhood and wanted to say to children—but also what children actually did with these texts, how they took possession of them. I hope to demonstrate that the penchant for destroying books that Field deplores can provide insight into the literary history of childhood. For this brief essay, I take as my archive the book-destroying habits of the children of one affluent, highly literary family in post–Civil War New England: the niece and nephews of the poet Emily Dickinson—Edward ("Ned"), born in 1861; Martha ("Mattie"), born in 1866; and Thomas Gilbert ("Gib"), born in 1875.

The Dickinson children lived in a house grandly named the Evergreens, which stands next door to their aunt's. Each child in turn used the same second-floor room as a nursery. The Dickinson connection is important, because it is ultimately Emily Dickinson's literary prominence that ensured the preservation of her brother's house with all its furnishings (including the nursery) fully intact—and prompted the preservation of Dickinson family papers in libraries at Harvard, Brown, and Amherst. Like most topics of social history, childhood is documented and preserved primarily for and by people

KAREN SÁNCHEZ-EPPLER is professor of American studies and English at Amherst College. Author of *Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body* (U of California P, 1993) and *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (U of Chicago P, 2005), she is completing a book manuscript provisionally entitled "The Unpublished Republic: Manuscript Cultures of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States." She is a founding coeditor of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* and was long a member of the board of governors of the Emily Dickinson Museum.

© 2011 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who are prominent or associated with the prominent. In 1990 all the books cataloged as belonging to the Evergreens' nursery, as well as the papers found in the nursery desk, were taken to Brown University's Special Collections, where they remain, virtually unread. There is nothing, after all, special about the books; they are fairly standard reading for children of the cultural elite in nineteenth-century rural New England. But because they have been preserved as the library of a particular set of children, they provide rich evidence of these children's ownership (fig. 1). Not only do we have many of the books the Dickinson children owned and read and wrote in, we also have the nursery itself, including four wooden nursery doors that the children decorated with pictures—mostly images cut from books and juvenile magazines—now preserved and on display at the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst (fig. 2).

There is evidence that many nineteenth-century children, as indeed many children of later periods, used print culture to claim space and express their pleasures and taste. The unusual thing about the Dickinsons' nursery doors is that there are so many of them and that in the intervening century they were never scraped clean. Gib, the youngest of the Dickinson children, died in October 1883 at the age of eight, so he never outgrew this childhood décor, and since no subsequent children lived in the house, the room remained as he left it, kept as a family memorial to the boy. By the 1890s Emily Dickinson's growing prestige led Mattie and her heirs to recognize the Ever-

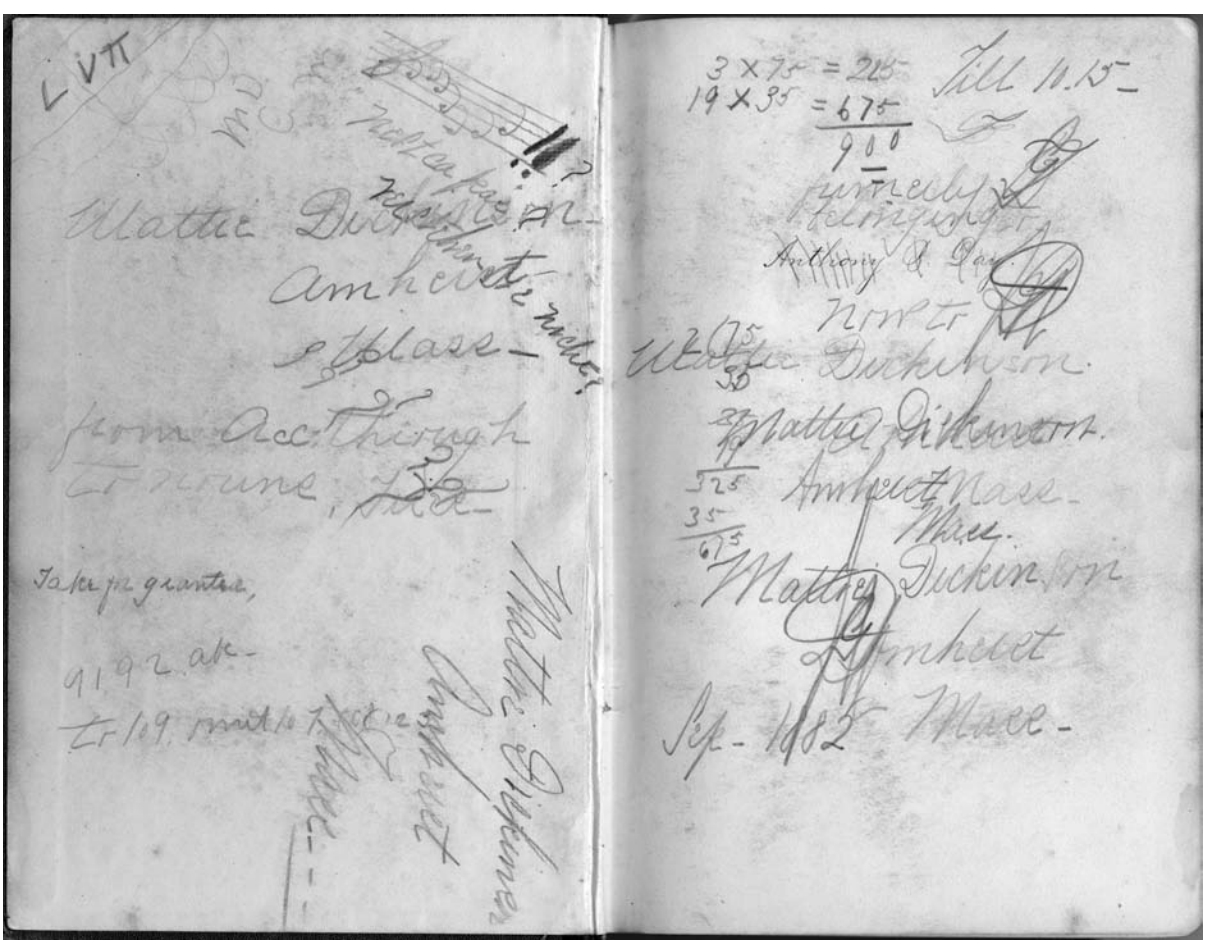


FIG. 1
The front endpaper of *Whitney's German Reader* (New York: Henry Holt, 1870), marked with variants of Martha Dickinson's name and town and signs of her studies in math, German, and music. Box 70, the Hampson Inventories, Special Collections, John Hay Library. Courtesy of Brown University Library.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

greens as a cultural legacy and to live in the house with almost curatorial compunction (St. Armand; Kirk). The children's library and handiwork have been preserved through a combination of loss and fame.

What to make of this "destruction of books"? What does the mere fact of scribbling and cutting tell us about the children's relation to print culture? Mattie colored the letters of her alphabet primer yellow, red, and blue. Does coloring adorn or deface these letters? Noah Webster, a Dickinson family friend and neighbor, insisted in his popular spelling book of 1829 that "good boys will use their books with care" (37). Lydia Sigourney complained in 1833, "I would have books treated with reverence. I cannot bear to see even a child spoil the spelling-book from which it has learned the alphabet. It savours of ingratitude to a benefactor" (77). But such prescriptions told only part of the story even then, since the ubiquity of these admonishments attests to a childish penchant for spoiling books. For these affluent children of the next generation, marking up books seems to have become part and parcel of learning to care about them. In insisting that literacy should be pleasurable, primers like Mattie Dickinson's *Reading without Tears*, by Favell Lee Mortimer, suggest the dawning of a less moralistic and anxious relation between children and their books. Indeed, this primer explicitly promotes the marking of books: a note above the alphabet suggests that the letters "might be coloured by degrees, as a reward to the little pupil for remembering their names" (1). By 1892 Louise Frances Field would take for granted that scribbling was what children did to books.



Fig. 2
The door into the nursery at the Evergreens. Courtesy of the Emily Dickinson Museum: the Homestead and the Evergreens, Amherst, Massachusetts.

Among the papers at Brown identified as coming from the Dickinson nursery desk is an advertising pamphlet from the late 1870s for L. P. Hollander and Company, produced as a holiday promotion for the "firm's custom and ready-made" children's clothing (fig. 3). This pamphlet contains the story *Our Picture Book*, which tells of little Annie, who "has got into trouble. Mama gave her a copy of Our Picture Book, and our little girl has torn out a leaf. Annie is sorry, but that does not mend the matter much." The facing page of the pamphlet is torn out. Without another copy to compare it against, I can't be sure whether this is a bit of advertiser's whimsy (L. P. Hollander cheerfully committing the very childhood naughtiness the text ostensibly chides) or whether the

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

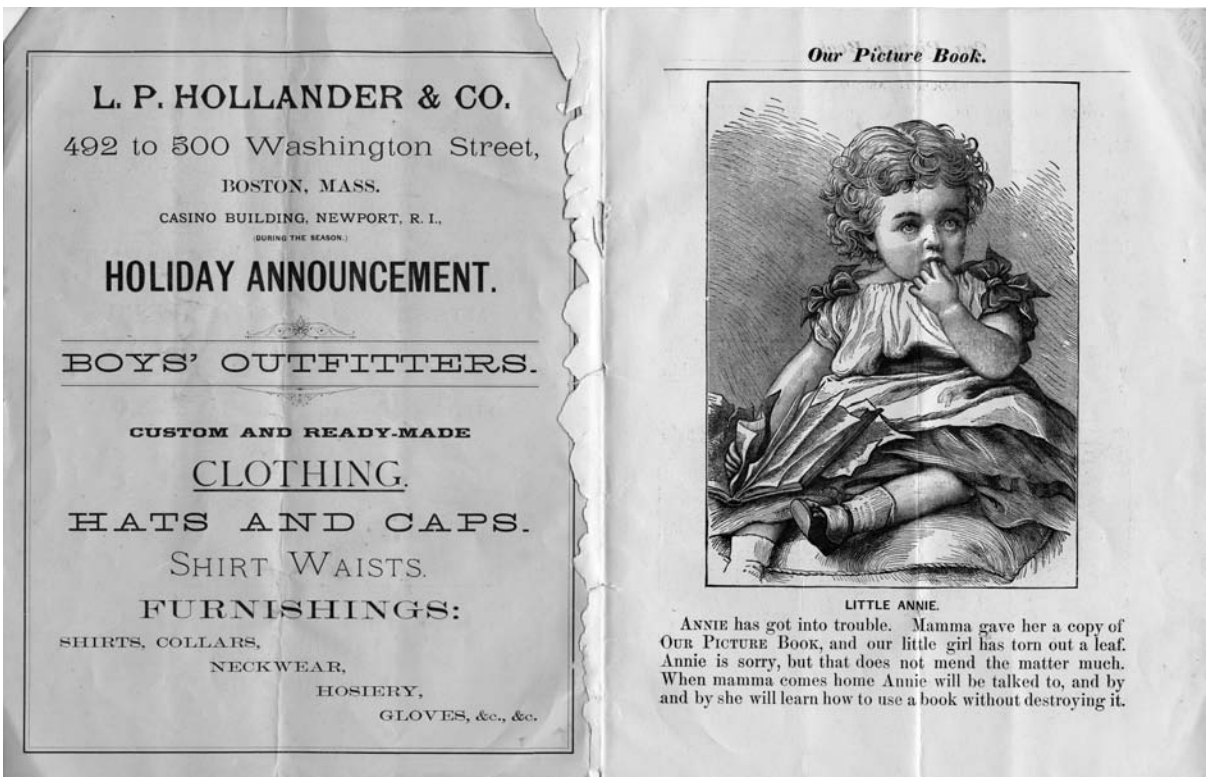


FIG. 3 Little Annie, from *Our Picture Book*, found in the Dickinson nursery desk. Note the remnants of a torn-out page. Box 222, the Hampson Inventories, Special Collections, John Hay Library. Courtesy of Brown University Library.

Dickinson children, reading about little Annie, decided to follow her example rather than heed the story's conventional advice. In either case, the pamphlet attests that tearing pages out of books is both wrong and charming. L. P. Hollander knows that parents who are likely to give such a holiday booklet to their children—hence parents who are indulgent enough to make good prospects for buying fairly expensive children's clothing—will smile over Annie's literary naughtiness. After all, such affluent families value an intimacy with books. Teaching a literary sensibility to children may present itself as disciplinary, but the mark of its success would be imaginative and mischievous.

There is a comparable pleasure in precocious, self-conscious naughtiness evident in the way Ned Dickinson talks about his three-year-old brother: "Gib is all right and as naughty as ever. . . . Once I asked him where he got his horses? Replied growing very red in the face that they were reindeers. And when I inquired where he got them he replied with a good deal of loudness of voice and asperity of manner at A T Stewarts." Both instances link naughtiness and imagination, and for such children and their families the positive valuation of these traits gains much of its power from a burgeoning consumerism. A. T. Stewart and Company was New York's first, and the world's largest, department store, with a mail-order trade that reached well beyond rural Massachusetts (Elias; Weil 11–78). In his play, Gib wants only the cosmopolitan best.

The methodological problems remain, however. Even if we recognize children's book defacement as a rising trend in the late nineteenth century, one tied to the burgeoning of printed things, the spread of consumerism, a new valuation of imaginative play, and a more permissive mode of parenting, how can we get beyond these generalizations to grasp what these particular children were up to when they chose to scribble on pages or pluck them from their books? How to interpret an archive of children's artifacts as rich as this cache of books,

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and papers, and elaborately decorated doors is not self-evident. How do we read a door?

Like more traditional scrapbooks, the Dickinson children's decorated doors testify to the ways public print culture could be put to individual, personal use, literally cut up and refashioned. Thus, the doors share much with general accounts of children as cultural scavengers. Readership and childhood are notoriously elusive subjects, where the deluge of prescriptive texts easily drowns the scant indications of actual activities and specific personal attitudes. Nineteenth-century children's books didactically tell their readers what lessons to draw from their tales, but they can't tell us what children value in the stories or how they use them. The decorated doors offer evidence of individual children's interactions with printed stories and pictures, but, like many traces of childhood, these doors resist interpretation. The thoughts and wishes behind the cutting of this picture and not another or behind the particular arrangement of images remain largely unknowable: the silence of the artifact. Still, in this work with scissors and glue, this claiming of printed things and domestic space, the Dickinson children left a rich and provocative record of their life in this house and in print culture.

The idea of possession invariably includes concern with space: the Dickinson children decorated not only the door to the nursery and the door to the closet inside the room but also the two hallway doors that bound the nursery section of the upstairs hall. This hall stretches from the top of the grand front stairs past the maid's room to the narrow backstairs that lead to the kitchen. The hall doors decorated by the children serve to separate the child space from the formal front of the house and the servant's back quarters, delineating the in-between place of childhood. That the children felt empowered to paste pictures on the doors and the adults allowed the images to remain—indeed, to spill out into the more trafficked hallway—points to a family acknowledgment of the children's control over at least this circumscribed middle space and later to the family's willingness, or even desire, to preserve the traces of their artistry.

What can the children's handiwork reveal about their relation to the images on the doors—and hence to the books and magazines from which they took these pictures (fig. 4)? *Robinson Crusoe* was the easiest source to identify. I recognized the title character, and there is a copy of Mary Godolphin's *Robinson Crusoe in Words of One Syllable* among the nursery books at Brown. It is inscribed to "Ned Dickinson from Ally's Mama December 25 1868," a Christmas present to the seven-year-old boy, and two of its plates are missing. So this book served not only as a source of images but also as a marker of relationships, recording how a community of parents celebrated one another's children. I bought a copy of the book, and it arrived with many of its plates loose (so here is a method—search book dealers for children's literature in poor condition). Thus, it seems possible that the Dickinson children didn't dismantle the book but simply put to good use the pages that had come loose from nearly a decade of avid reading.

Similarly, I recognized a picture of old Rip Van Winkle, and in reviewing illustrated copies of the story from the 1860s and 1870s, I found that it and two neighboring images all came from the same eight-page pamphlet: Edmund Clarence Stedman's verse version of the legend. The Dickinson children took three of the booklet's four pictures for use on the door. They skipped the scolding illustration of how "Dame Van Winkle's merciless tongue berated them every day and night" (4). In picking these images, the children reveal their interests and edit the story to evade that wagging finger. The pictures of Robinson Crusoe and Rip Van Winkle are the only colored book illustrations I have been able to identify on the doors, though there may be others. In putting them side by side, the children seem to acknowledge something about their shared status as objects and also, perhaps, something about the deep

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.151 Published online by Cambridge University Press



FIG. 4
Colored illustrations from *Rip Van Winkle* and *Robinson Crusoe*, pasted on a door in the hallway outside the Evergreens' nursery. Courtesy of the Emily Dickinson Museum: the Homestead and the Evergreens, Amherst, Massachusetts.

resonances between these stories of displacement in geography and displacement in history and hence the colonial and nationalist legacies of the tales. In juxtaposing these two characters on their nursery doors, the children claim possession of this space and these stories. But with this act they also demonstrate how firmly their reading has already installed them inside cultural narrative.

Most of the images on the doors come not from books but from juvenile periodicals. My process for tracing them (it is hardly appropriate to call it a method) was to leaf through likely children's magazines. The children took at least eight images from the *Nursery*. They culled pictures from issues published between 1867 and 1875, cutting no more than two pictures from any single volume of the magazine, so that after the clipping the magazines would have remained largely intact. If their scissor work did little damage to these volumes, the children sometimes did manage to alter meanings, severing picture from word with often striking results. The charming images of dogs parading in fancy clothes pasted symmetrically on the hallway door illustrate a maudlin story about an orphaned crippled boy living with his poor widowed aunt, her large family of children, and a stray dog (fig. 5). "It was a sad thought to John that he could not work so as to help his good aunt," so he asks himself the happily lucrative question "What if I try to earn some money by exhibiting Pomp?" (Uncle Charles 72). Pasted on the door, the pictures seem playful and rich with fancy, with little to hint that this exuberant masquerade rests on a prodigious heap of sentimental woe. Even more markedly, in the picture "Get Up, Nanny!" a goat led by a girl holding a whip high pulls a cart containing a little boy with a raised stick (fig. 6). The story anxiously explains:

> Paul takes a stick in his hand, and cries out, "Get up, Nanny!" While Lucy walks besides

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.151 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Fig. 5
Illustration from "John Ray's Performing Dogs," in the *Nursery* (1873), pasted on a door in the hallway outside the Evergreens' nursery. Courtesy of the Emily Dickinson Museum: the Homestead and the Evergreens, Amherst, Massachusetts.

> Nanny's head, and sees that she does not run, or act so as to upset the wagon.
>
> Nanny is a good goat. She knows she will be well fed if she behaves well; and though Lucy has a whip in her hand, Lucy does not have to use it to make Nanny mind. (Anna L —— 43–44)

The Danish artist Lorenz Frølich was a favored *Nursery* illustrator: the table of contents distinguishes his work from the many anonymous images, and the magazine frequently boasted of his illustrations in its advertising. This drawing of two children and a goat is by Frølich, and I suspect that the *Nursery* obtained the drawing first and then commissioned the story to go with it, the pseudonymous author dutifully striving to contain the happy violence of this image. Pasting the picture of boy, girl, goat, and cart on their closet door, the Dickinson children cut off such palliative explanations. In the nursery, shorn of the didactic text, there are no assurances that Lucy won't use her whip or, even as her glance back might suggest, teach Paul how to wield his stick. In separating picture from story, the children make space for other meanings.

Other family documents confirm this unsentimental attitude toward animals:

> Gib says tell Ned "fiddle + fiz" + to bring me home some peper-mints + that's all. He is "puffally wild" because on his proposing to bring home a kitten from Mrs. Percivals Papa told him that kittens were always used for making hash + if he brought one home it would be used for that.

This letter from Mattie, like Ned's to their mother, may be harsh toward kittens, but it does display a doting, amused attitude toward



Fig. 6
Illustration from "Get Up, Nanny!" in the *Nursery* (1869), pasted on the closet door in the Evergreens' nursery. Courtesy of the Emily Dickinson Museum: the Homestead and the Evergreens, Amherst, Massachusetts.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their little brother. A variety of evidence suggests that the doors were decorated in the late 1870s, when the nursery was occupied by Gib but when he would not have been old enough to do the cutting and pasting himself or to reach so high on the doors. It seems that Ned and Mattie were responsible for this handiwork, taking many of the images from the books and magazines that had belonged to them when they were little. At the same time that the children were creating these doors, they also made a scrap album that included other images from the same sources. One page of the album bears Gib's penciled initials, TGD, in childish script beside a Christmas card (fig. 7). The other large image on this page shows a colored print of a



Fig. 7
A page from a scrap album by the Dickinson children, containing an 1875 Louis Prang Christmas card, bits of swag, and a large colored print from Frances Elizabeth Barrow's story "Charles and His Ducks." The page is initialed for Thomas Gilbert Dickinson. Box 28, folder 36, Emily Dickinson Collection, Frost Library. Courtesy of the Amherst College Archives and Special Collections.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.151 Published online by Cambridge University Press

young girl giving her baby brother a bath. The Dickinson children pasted onto the hallway door a black-and-white version of the same image, clipped from the story "Charles and His Ducks," in the *Nursery*:

> Charlie has with him in the tub two little ducks. But they are not live ducks. They are made of wood. They float on water.
>
> Em′ma is a good sis′ter to Charles. She takes care of him. She loves to a-muse him, and to tell him sto′ries.
>
> "Shall I tell you a story of a duck?"
>
> (Barrow 169–70)

Printed with large letters and syllabic markers designed to help young readers manage the longer words, the story is intended to ease children into reading, and the tale celebrates the role of older sisters in initiating little brothers into the pleasures of fiction and imaginative play. Chosen twice from different sources for different scrap projects, this picture is clearly meaningful for the Dickinson children; it says something of the solicitude felt by the older children toward their baby brother that this album page is marked "TGD." Among the many things children's literature did for this family was to give them a way to express and structure their relations with one another.

There remains a great deal that this unusual archive cannot tell about the children's meanings and intentions. Indeed, the very notion of intention, agency, or purpose remains the largest stake of my inquiry. Children's literature serves as a powerful mechanism of socialization; produced and marketed for children and consumed by them, it offers a prime instance of cultural reproduction. The Dickinson children's scrap work and scribbles clearly carry commercial, national, familial, and emotional implications. Moreover, how the children treated their books, the evident intimacy of their engagement with pictures and stories, suggests their avid awareness of the role of print culture in their lives. But if the Dickinson children understood themselves as literally living in a house of print, what should we finally make of these marks of possession? Did these books belong to these children? Or were the children possessed by their books?

Works Cited

Anna L ——. "Get Up, Nanny!" *Nursery* 6 (1869): 43–44. Print.

Barrow, Frances Elizabeth. "Charles and His Ducks." *Nursery* 2 (1867): 169–72. Print.

Dickinson, Martha. Letter to Ned Dickinson. [C. 1880]. MS. Martha Dickinson Bianchi Papers, Special Collections, John Hay Lib., Brown U.

Dickinson, Ned. Letter to Susan Dickinson. 11 Jan. 1879. MS. Martha Dickinson Bianchi Papers, Special Collections, John Hay Lib., Brown U.

Elias, Stephen. *Alexander T. Stewart: The Forgotten Merchant Prince*. Westport: Praeger, 1992. Print.

Field, E. M., Mrs. [Louise Frances Field]. *The Child and His Book: Some Account of the History and Progress of Children's Literature in England*. London: Wells Gardner, 1892. Print.

Godolphin, Mary [Lucy Aiken]. *Robinson Crusoe in Words of One Syllable*. New York: Routledge, n.d. Print.

Hunt, Peter. *Children's Literature: An Illustrated History*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. Print.

Kirk, Connie Ann. "'Open the Door, They Are Waiting for Me': An Introduction to the Evergreens Nursery." *Emily Dickinson International Society Bulletin* 16.1 (2004): 4–6. Print.

Mortimer, Favell Lee. *Reading without Tears: A Pleasant Mode of Learning to Read*. New York: Harper, 1869. Print.

Our Picture Book. Boston: Hollander, n.d. Print.

Rose, Jacqueline. *The Case of Peter Pan; or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1984. Print.

Sigourney, Lydia. *Letters to Young Ladies*. Hartford: Canfield, 1833. Print.

St. Armand, Barton Levi. "Keeper of the Keys: Mary Hampson, the Evergreens, and the Art Within." *The Dickinsons of Amherst: Photographs by Jerome Liebling*. Ed. Christopher Benfy, Polly Longsworth, and St. Armand. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2001. 107–67. Print.

Stedman, Edmund Clarence. *Rip Van Winkle and His Wonderful Nap*. Boston: Fields, 1870. Print.

Uncle Charles. "John Ray's Performing Dogs." *Nursery* 13 (1873): 71–74. Print.

Webster, Noah. *The Elementary Spelling Book*. New York: Cooledge, 1829. Print.

Weil, François. *A History of New York*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.1.151 Published online by Cambridge University Press