

Aberystwyth University

'A Library of Our Own Compositions'

Gleadle, Kathryn; Rodgers, Beth

Published in:

Journal of Victorian Culture

DOI:

[10.1093/jvcult/vcac035](https://doi.org/10.1093/jvcult/vcac035)

Publication date:

2022

Citation for published version (APA):

Gleadle, K., & Rodgers, B. (2022). 'A Library of Our Own Compositions': The Minervian Library and Children's Social Authorship in Victorian Orkney. *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 27(3), 477-492. Article vcac035. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jvcult/vcac035>

Document License

CC BY

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Aberystwyth Research Portal (the Institutional Repository) are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Aberystwyth Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Aberystwyth Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

tel: +44 1970 62 2400

email: is@aber.ac.uk

‘A Library of Our Own Compositions’: The Minervian Library and Children’s Social Authorship in Victorian Orkney

Kathryn Gleadle* and Beth Rodgers†

* Mansfield College, University of Oxford, UK, E-mail: kathryn.gleadle@history.ox.ac.uk

† Department of English and Creative Writing, Aberystwyth University, Wales, UK, E-mail: bjr6@aber.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This article examines the Minervian Library, an extraordinary collection of children’s manuscript stories produced in mid-Victorian Orkney. Established in 1866 by sisters Mary and Clara Cowan and their cousin Isabella Bremner, the collaborative project had ambitions beyond its beginnings as a family literary endeavour: the girls envisaged a working library complete with membership and borrowing records. On offer to the ‘Library Damsels of the Minervian Library’, as they dubbed their members, were 50 of their own original compositions, mostly comprising fairy tales, domestic dramas, and stories of European nobility. In this article, we argue that an analysis of these manuscripts and the social networks in which they were produced and circulated challenges our understanding of literary juvenilia and its relationship to wider cultural processes. We posit that the manuscripts offer a striking example of juvenile ‘social authorship’, not only in the sense of their circulation among a community of readers, but also in the ways that the authors actively engaged with developing literary trends, such as the emergence of the European literary fairy tale, and responded to contemporary debates about girlhood and girls’ lives. In this way, the Minervian Library demonstrates that children were not simply passive consumers of cultural activities, but could also be participants in the creation of collective meanings and discourses.

1. INTRODUCTION

In mid-Victorian Orkney a small group of children set out to produce their own library. As they explained in their ‘Annals of the Minervian Library’, having gathered together 100 works, comprising fairy tales, short stories, poems, plays, humorous newspaper articles, translations, and transcriptions of published work, they decided to preserve for the library, which they instituted in 1866, only the 50 works which they themselves had authored.¹ The bulk of the collection was written by Mary Cowan (who was 12 years old when they began writing their compositions in 1864), her sister Clara, and their cousin Isabella Bremner (both aged 10). Together they organized the project, although Mary and Clara’s younger brothers, Malcolm (born 1857) and Alfred (born 1861), contributed a handful of stories to the collection. Their efforts resulted in an extraordinary collection of juvenile manuscripts – one of the most significant collections of British children’s writings to come to light in recent years.²

¹ ‘Annals of the Minervian Library’, Orkney Library and Archive, GB/241/D98/2/4/5.

² The collection is in Orkney Library and Archive [hereafter GB/241], GB/241/D98. We thank them for permission to quote from and reproduce material. The Minervian Library remains unstudied, apart from a brief reference in Bryce Wilson, *Profit Not Loss: The Story of the Baikies of Tankerness* (Kirkwall: Orkney Heritage, 2003), p. 39, and the helpful overview by Chris Holtom, ‘The Library Damsels of the Minervian Library’, consulted in Orkney archive. Mary Cowan sometimes appears as ‘Maria’. Malcolm appears to have written two stories and Alfred five. There is no record that the two further siblings, William and Eliza, participated in the writing project.

The children engaged with two conceptions of ‘the library’. Firstly, it was a working library. Isabella Bremner kept a brief borrowing record for the ‘L.D.M.L. [Library Damsels of the Minervian Library]’, during the summer of 1867. This indicated that 21 individuals borrowed a total of 53 items.³ Secondly, it was a library in the sense of a collection of stories.⁴ Understanding the dual function of this writing project – as both a social venture and an ambitious literary endeavour – is central to this article. We consider how the Minervian Library and the cultural activities of the children’s network can substantially advance our understanding of the constitution and significance of literary juvenilia. Existing studies of juvenilia often privilege insular writing practices or focus on children who subsequently became famous writers in adulthood.⁵ Written and read by young people who did not go on to ‘make it’ as writers (nor perhaps desired to), a consideration of the Minervian manuscripts allows us to follow recent scholarship in offering insights into juvenilia on its own terms.⁶ Moreover, as a functioning library the manuscripts permit us to see how child-produced material could be far from inward-looking in both nature and readership. The Cowan children’s circulation of their work among an established network and via public performances of their plays provides multiple insights into how children, as Karen Sánchez-Eppler writes in her study of American childhood, act as ‘significant and varied participants in the making of social meaning.’⁷

The Minervian collection enables us to consider the recursive relationships between adult and juvenile cultures. The library’s extant records show that adults occasionally judged prize-winners from among the stories, and they were part of the library borrowing community.⁸ A study of the Minervian Library provides opportunities to probe the ways in which children’s activities are part of broader culture, rather than being ancillary to or miniaturized versions of it. The only other juvenile library to have received sustained scholarly discussion is that of the Hale family – a mid-nineteenth-century American collection. However, whereas Sánchez-Eppler considers how the Hale children were ‘coproducing privacy’ as they constructed an ‘alternative public sphere,’⁹ our study focuses upon how, in deliberately archiving a collection of stories and plays for community consumption, these child authors helped to comprise the normative public sphere of their community.

The Minervian Library provides unique insights into the ways in which juvenile ‘social authorship’ can have far-reaching significance. In her ground-breaking assessment of ‘scribal

³ A small number are not extant. ‘Account Book under the Special Charge of I. Bremner’, GB/241/D98/2/4/4.

⁴ For example, Benjamin Tabart, *Popular Fairy Tales, or, A Liliputian Library; Containing Twenty-Six Choice Pieces of Fancy and Fiction* (London: Tabart and Co., 1818).

⁵ An indicative example is the excellent *The Child Writer from Austen to Woolf*, ed. by Christine Alexander and Juliet McMaster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁶ Catherine Sloan, “‘Periodicals of an Objectionable Character’: Peers and Periodicals at Croydon Friends’ School, 1826–1875”, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 50 (2017), 769–86; Lois Burke, “‘Meantime, it is Quite Well to Write’: Adolescent Writing and Victorian Literary Culture in Girls’ Manuscript Magazines”, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 52 (2019), 719–48.

⁷ Karen Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child’s Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xv.

⁸ In the ‘Annals’, the girls noted that ‘The Romance of the Vehme’ (the most borrowed manuscript and possibly named after the Holy Vehme in Walter Scott’s *Anne of Geierstein* (1829)), was ‘read & criticized. Favourably, by the mother of the Author [Clara Cowan]; pp. 5–6, 2–3. ‘The Effect of Love’ includes a note written in another hand awarding ‘the honour of being the best novelist to the gifted and distinguished author’. A note from Clara written ‘long afterwards’, one of a handful of retrospective annotations she made on the library, records this was presented by ‘our kind old friend Rev. John Stewart’. GB/241/D98/1/2/11.

⁹ Karen Sánchez-Eppler, ‘Practicing for Print: The Hale Children’s Manuscript Libraries’, *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 1 (2008), 188–209 (p. 191).

circulation' in the early modern period, Margaret Ezell probed how 'the manuscript text operates as a medium of social exchange', dissolving the boundaries between private and public composition.¹⁰ We follow Catherine Sloan in arguing for the salience of these ideas for analysing juvenile authorship well into the Victorian period. Like Sloan, we examine the potential of social authorship to enhance affective ties, and consider the dynamic relationships such writing practices had with published literature.¹¹

In exploring the implications of juvenile manuscript circulation, we develop a capacious understanding of 'social authorship'. This positions the children's manuscripts as 'social' not only in their means of circulation, but in three further ways. Firstly, we consider the middle-class Orcadian community, exploring how the children's literary sociability both contributed to, and was an expression of, specific social processes within it. Secondly, by considering the Minervian oeuvre in greater depth, we analyse its creative relationship with print culture. We focus upon a small selection of the most accomplished stories, comprising romance, fairy tale, domestic drama, and adventure (and often a mix of several of these at once). These narratives give a good sense of the collection's style, tone, themes, and use of literary allusion.¹² The Minervian manuscripts share the 'fast-paced methods' and playfulness often associated with juvenilia,¹³ but they also reveal the extent to which children's writing, with all its generic instability, could be intricately enmeshed with, and constitutive of, broader literary trends. Finally, we consider how, as acts of social authorship, the children's works participated in the creation of collective meanings and discourses. In particular, the authors experimented with the registers and discourses of contemporary girlhood itself.

2. COMMUNITY, SOCIABILITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

In their study of nineteenth-century American literary life, Zboray and Zboray pinpointed the significance of amateur writers, who 'refashioned ideas gleaned from literature into webs of local knowledge that were spun out through social ties'.¹⁴ This article suggests a similar importance be assigned to juvenile authors. To do so we need to understand the particular cultural context of mid-Victorian Orkney. This was, in some respects, a 'golden age' for Orkney, a group of islands some 10 miles from mainland north-east Scotland. The Cowans came from one of the leading elite families on the island of Orkney.¹⁵ The archipelago's population reached its peak in this period, at around 30,000; and the advent of the paddle steamer helped to stimulate the economy, agriculture, and kelp industry. These developments were further facilitated by winter sailings to Kirkwall, Orkney's capital, from 1850 and the construction of a new iron pier in the mid-1860s.¹⁶ This was also a period of enhanced cultural and

¹⁰ Margaret Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p. 40.

¹¹ Sloan, 'Periodicals of an Objectionable Character'.

¹² These are: Clara Cowan, 'Evangeline' (1867) GB/241/D98/1/2/18; Maria and Clara Cowan, 'The Adventures of Augustus' (1865) GB/241/D98/1/5/1; Maria Cowan, 'Derwent Melville' (1866) GB/241/D98/1/3/9; Clara Cowan, 'Evelina or The Maiden Chief' (1866–1867) GB/241/D98/1/2/4; Clara Cowan, 'The Effect of Love' (1866) GB/241/D98/1/2/11; and Anon., 'To Gain his Love' (1867) GB/241/D98/1/4/12.

¹³ Emma Butcher, *The Brontës and War: Fantasy and Conflict in Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's Youthful Writings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 6.

¹⁴ Ronald J. Zboray and Mary S. Zboray, *Everyday Ideas: Socioliterary Experience Among Antebellum New Englanders* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2006), p. xvii.

¹⁵ For wider context on the family see Wilson, *Profit Not Loss*.

¹⁶ William P. L. Thomson, *The New History of Orkney* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008), p. 384; Tom Muir, 'Transport and Communications', in *The Orkney Book*, ed. by Donald Omand (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2003), pp. 215–16.

associational life. In 1854, *The Orcadian* became the islands' first newspaper (followed by *The Orkney Herald* six years later). *The Orcadian* included a literature column with a 'Children's Leisure Hour' featuring local authors. Furthermore, it regularly printed articles on the significance of female education and in support of female suffrage.¹⁷ Mid-Victorian Orkney could be a stimulating environment. It was characterized by webs of global connections, as well as rich associations with mainland Scotland (especially Edinburgh), south-east England (all the Cowan siblings were born in London), and the European continent. The children of the Minervian circle both reflected these diverse associations and actively participated in their production. Due to its geographical location, the Hudson Bay Company had long recruited from the islands; but imperial careers were common too among the middling classes.¹⁸ Family papers demonstrate dense global connections. The Cowan children's uncle, Robert Baikie, who became Orkney's ninth laird in 1869, was a surgeon with the East India Company; and a number of middle-class Orcadians undertook missionary work in Africa. Emigration to white settler colonies was common. One of the children who appears to have helped the Minervian authors with their plays, Robina Watt, had been born in Tasmania.¹⁹ Notwithstanding a geographical location sometimes assumed to be 'remote', an analysis of the Minervian Library allows us to recreate aspects of its dynamic culture.

Excavating the girlhood circle of the Minervian Library illuminates these and other distinctive features of Orcadian history. Educational opportunities are an important case in point. It is clear that female education was highly valued on Orkney, even in comparison to Scotland's 'democratic tradition' in relation to girls' schooling.²⁰ In 1868 there were six private girls' schools in Kirkwall alone, and Kirkwall Grammar School (which the Cowan brothers attended) was mixed-sex and had an exceptionally wide social constituency.²¹ There is no record that either Mary, Clara, or Isabella attended the grammar school, but some in their circle took up places there following initial education at local private girls' schools. Sarah B. Craig, a Minervian borrower and a solicitor's daughter, appears in the records as a pupil at the grammar school where she won a number of prizes.²² Others in the Minervian friendship network attended schools in Edinburgh. As Rev. William McGowan (formerly the United Presbyterian Minister, Sandwick) wrote from New Zealand to his niece Janet Ann Clouston in 1870, she should 'endeavour to become as good a scholar as you can. You have been very greatly advantaged . . . Edin[burg]h is the best place for schools & for education perhaps in the world.'²³ In addition, many in the Orcadian middle classes had strong educational links with Germany. Another of the Minervian borrowers, Georgie Gold, spent a period of education in Germany with her sister, as did another friend, Charlotte Nisbet.²⁴

Through letter-writing this elite girlhood community was nurtured during periods of absence from the island. In this respect, the families associated with the Minervian circle took

¹⁷ For example, *The Orcadian*, 23 October 1866; 28 April 1868; 22 September 1868.

¹⁸ Suzanne Rigg, 'Scots in the Hudson's Bay Company, c. 1779–c. 1821', *Northern Scotland*, 2 (2011), 36–59.

¹⁹ Wilson, *Profit Not Loss*, pp. 32, 37, 76, 85; James M. Irvine, *The Breckness Estate; A History Of Its Lairds, Tenants and Farms and Skail House* (Surrey: J. M. Irvine, 2009), pp. 189, 199; 'Annals'.

²⁰ Lindy Moore, 'Invisible Scholars: Girls Learning Latin and Mathematics in the Elementary Public Schools of Scotland before 1872', *History of Education*, 13 (1984), 121–37.

²¹ *Peace's Orkney and Shetland Almanac* (1868–1876); MS Admission Register Kirkwall Grammar School, CO5/80/2. *The Orcadian*, 31 July 1866.

²² Rev. William McGowan to Janet Ann Clouston, 22 June 1870, Clouston/Nisbet papers GB/241/D40/2/2.

²⁴ Janet Clouston to her mother, Harriet Clouston, 4 October 1869, GB/241/D40/1/8; Charlotte Nisbet to Mrs Clouston, 12 June 1872, GB/241/D40/1/13.

keen advantage of the period's improved transport and postal links to maintain epistolary networks. The girls of the Orcadian middle classes exchanged ideas for reading, noting books they had borrowed from local libraries, for example, and enjoyed a girlhood material culture of affective exchange. As Charlotte Nisbet wrote from school in Edinburgh to her friend back home, she was pasting 'orkney views' into her album and re-reading the poetry her local friends had inscribed in it.²⁵ The Minervian Library was therefore born out of a specific context in which literature and books were a way of maintaining networks and girlhood sociability. This was indicative of the girls' contribution to the rich social and cultural links which cohered the islands' middle-class families. Amanda Vickery, noting the proliferation of women's cultural activities, has written of 'an early nineteenth-century institutionalization of female intellectual life'.²⁶ Recent studies have also pointed to the significance of Victorian girls' literary initiatives in enabling educational advancement. Autobiographical writing is suggestive of the richness of young women's initiatives, with reading and essay societies launched by female youth to enhance sociability and self-education.²⁷ The Minervian Library was just such a project, enhancing friendship circles for those resident on the archipelago's main island. The Cowan children and their parents, William and Deborah, appear to have lived in the countryside property of the Hall of Tankerness before moving to Tankerness House in Kirkwall on the death of the eighth laird in 1869. However, from the summer of 1867, a year after the library had been formed, the children took the collection to Tankerness House in Kirkwall each Saturday, to lend individual works out to friends and acquaintances.²⁸ The authors drew attention to the collaborative nature of the library's creation. In imitation of published novels, they embraced the convention of using 'by the author of...' in place of author names,²⁹ but in many instances they tweaked this explaining that the writer was 'partly author of...'. Similarly, some of the plays appear to be collaboratively constructed, as if the children took turns to compose them.³⁰ Like the plays, many tales are illustrated, sometimes hurriedly, or have decorative titles pasted on. These are not polished artefacts, but appear to be rather spontaneous creations composed as part of the practices of juvenile sociability.

Libraries had long held a central place within Orkney's literary culture. The islands boasted one of the oldest public libraries in Scotland, a collection established by William Balfour Baikie in the seventeenth century and deposited in St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall. His eighteenth-century descendant, Robert Baikie, compiled 'The Baikie Library' held in Tankerness House. The latter was the Cowan children's great uncle and the collection's reprints of fashionable literary works were a key feature of the Minervians' literary lineage.³¹ During the flourishing of associational life in Orkney in the 1860s, libraries reached a new significance, and the Minervian Library needs to be seen as part of this development. Matching names from the

²⁵ Charlotte Nisbet to Janet Clouston [Nennie], 26 September 1873, GB/241/D40/1/13.

²⁶ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 58.

²⁷ Kathryn Gleadle, 'Magazine Culture, Girlhood Communities, and Educational Reform in Late Victorian Britain', *English Historical Review*, 134 (2019), 1169–95; Mary Bayly, *The Life and Letters of Mrs Sewell* (London: J. Nisbet, 1889), p. 42; Ann K. Jacques, *Merrie Wakefield: Based on Some of the Dairies of Clara Clarkson, 1811–89, of Alverthorpe Hall, Wakefield* (Wakefield: West Yorkshire Printing, 1971), pp. 87, 90, 94, 115.

²⁸ 'Annals'. Hall of Tankerness (and the variant Tankerness Hall) is sometimes given as place of publication on the title page of their works and it was here (and also later in Tankerness House) they staged their plays.

²⁹ Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 10–11.

³⁰ For example, Anon., 'Secret Characters', in 'A Book of Plays' (1865), GB/241/D98/1/4/13.

³¹ Katherine Armstrong, 'A Library in Orkney', *Factotum: Newsletter of the XVIIIth Century STC*, 30 (1989), 5.

library's borrowing record with the 1861 and 1871 censuses, it is evident that many in the Minervian circle came from families actively interested in promoting libraries locally. One Minervian borrower, Cecilia Scarth, was the daughter of Robert, who was president of the local library association; another, Georgie Gold, was the daughter of Andrew, chair of the committee which proposed a new library in 1867; and the Rev. William Spark (Minister of Kirkwall and St Ola), whose children were closely involved in the Minervian circle, built an extensive library himself.³² The Minervian Library contributed to the flourishing literary and library culture on the islands, and was a further forum for community cultural engagement. Whilst the account book suggests that most members were probably young girls, the library was also used by adult members of both sexes.³³ That borrowers transcended age divisions testifies to the broader social reach of the project, and indicates the extent to which juvenile endeavour was interwoven with the local public sphere.

An even more visible way in which the Minervian children contributed to Orcadian social networks was in their public theatricals.³⁴ These preceded the establishment of the library, but also became entwined with its activities. Printed invitations indicate that the children performed alongside adult family friends, again pointing to the interlacing of juvenile and mature cultural practices. For example, they twice performed the comedietta *Alonzo The Brave; or, Faust and The Fair Imogene* by F. C. Burnand at Tankerness House in Kirkwall. Although there was adult involvement here, the children had long taken the initiative in staging private theatricals.³⁵ In her later recollections, Clara Elgin (née Cowan) explained that before the idea of compiling a library came to them, she, Mary, and Isabella put on a performance of their own drama, 'Semiramis Queen of Assyria'. The plans were elaborate: Isabella and two other friends, Anna Bain and Robina Watt, were invited to stay with them at the Hall of Tankerness for the purpose. Their mother helped with the costumes, and a large barn was decorated with lanterns for the occasion. Their elder sister, 16-year-old Elizabeth, took the title role.³⁶

The children's work 'circulated', as it were, in Kirkwall even before the institution of their own circulating library as the children were permitted to invite the tenants and families of their uncle, James Baikie, to the performances.³⁷ Children's play and adult power here converged. Class relations were enacted at these events, with the landlord's young relatives literally elevated before the tenants. The public nature of these (sometimes not quite) 'at-home' theatricals, performed beyond the remit of the family, enabled the children to 'perform' their roles as members of elite Orcadian society.³⁸ More ambitious plans followed in 1869 as the

³² 'Account Book'; *The Orcadian*, 5 February 1867; John Smith, *Annals of the Church of Scotland in Orkney from 1560. History of the U.P. Church in Orkney until 1906. And also the Episcopal Church from 1694* (Kirkwall: W. R. Macintosh, 1907), p. 65.

³³ The complexity of Orcadian kinship networks and the account book's partial nature make definitive identification difficult, but membership of the library appears to include, among others, John A. Bruce, a former divinity student in his early 30s; Mary Barry, daughter of the local clergy and in her early 60s; and Mr Graeme of Grahame Hall. 'Account Book'.

³⁴ The girls composed many dramas. 'The Wonderful And Amazing Pantomime of Little Bo-Peep' mimicked the fashion for plays based upon nursery rhymes. 'Artemesia & Orestes' followed Greek tradition. Some fused diverse traditions of ancient history, as in 'Damocles and Zenobia', whilst some were rooted in stories of European royalty, such as 'Prince & Princess', 'Flavia's Doom', and 'The Captured Princess'. See GB/241/D98/1/4/13; GB/241/D98/1/5/4; GB/241/D98/1/2/25; GB/241/D98/1/4/7.

³⁵ Invitation to a Dramatic Performance, GB/241/D98/2/4/1.

³⁶ 'Annals'.

³⁷ 'Annals'.

³⁸ See Megan A. Norcia, 'Playing Empire: Children's Parlor Games, Home Theatricals, and Improvisational Play', *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 29 (2004), 294–314 for related discussion of children's theatricals and imperial identities.

children used the laird's residence, Tankerness House in Kirkwall, to stage plays. This included a rendition of 'Beauty and the Beast',³⁹ and examples of their own work, such as 'Semiramis Queen of Assyria', the play now billed as a 'new and exciting farce'. A celebration of the New Year, this play was performed on 1 and 4 January alongside another of the girls' compositions, 'The Four Seasons in Allegory'. These performances were presented as community occasions, rather than familial ones. Printed invitations were distributed, with Tankerness House dubbed 'the Theatre Royal'. Just as they mimicked bibliographical forms, the children comically appropriated the conventions of theatrical advertising. Their handbill included such announcements as, 'We also request to announce that the far famed and accomplished Miss Bremner will again entrance her audience on that auspicious evening.'⁴⁰

These plays and their ephemera are an important part of the Minervian story, demonstrating that the ambitions for the library need to be understood within a web of other social activities. These were shared events in which the culture of children and adults interpenetrated, but did not always perfectly coincide. As an elderly lady, Clara Elgin mused that her great-uncle and his friends had found their acting amusing.⁴¹ But so too did the children poke fun at the community's adult-dominated structures. Additional pieces in the Minervian collection, which may come from a slightly later date (and some of which are written in a variety of hands), suggest the children were composing satirical newspaper articles. These made comical allusions to the head teacher at the grammar school, referred sardonically to town council rows, and mocked the pace of progress on the construction of a new pier. The missionary zeal of the Kirk community was also lampooned with a parody of a church soiree in which one of the speakers 'exhorted the assembled multitude to study hard in their youth that they might be able to go out to Africa and come home with ample fortunes and black wives.'⁴² These knowing critiques positioned the young as astute observers of a 'glocal' public sphere to which they contributed but also appraised, underlining the outward-looking nature of their writing. These children's works commonly involved multiple audiences, extended to kinship networks and local communities, and spoke to wider social affairs.

3. LITERARY INFLUENCES

We turn now to consider more closely the children's literary works. The Minervian manuscripts are a diverse and uneven collection. Many were hurriedly written (sometimes, it is indicated, in a single day);⁴³ some were abandoned midway, or roughly executed; and unattributed transcripts of printed material appear, complicating the process of analysis. Nonetheless, as with the Hale family's library discussed by Sánchez-Eppler, cumulatively the compositions reveal a shrewd sensitivity to literary conventions and the formal properties of printed texts. Many feature dedications and include satirical prefaces, and narrators often address the reader directly.⁴⁴ The manuscripts reveal a willingness to be playful and inventive when it comes to genre, tone, and style, often combining tropes from fairy tale traditions and

³⁹ Advertisement for the performance of 'Beauty and The Beast', GB/241/D98/2/4/7.

⁴⁰ Advertisement for the performance of 'Farce Semiramis Queen of Assyria' also 'Proserpine or Striking A Match' on 4 January 1869, GB/241/D98/2/4/6.

⁴¹ 'Annals'.

⁴² 'Leading Article Bogling Beaumont'; 'Late Doings At The Town Council'; 'Murderous Intentions'; 'General News', GB/241/D98/2/1/5.

⁴³ 'Tower of Dread' by Clara Cowan was 'finished and begun on July 13, 1867', GB/241/D98/1/2/19.

⁴⁴ For example, 'And now if my reader will descend with me into the kitchen we shall see what is going on there.' Maria and Clara Cowan, 'The Adventures of Augustus', p. 22.

domestic fiction. In such moments, the manuscripts do not merely represent imperfect imitations of established genres; rather, it is often in these generic borrowings and tonal shifts that the collection's wit, energy, and ambition can most clearly be perceived. Many of the stories focus upon writing as a sociable and pleasurable activity. In the opening lines of 'Evangeline', a character describes her 'inexpressible pleasure' at writing to her friend, extolling 'the luxurious ease of such rest . . . seated by a blazing fire, with my writing materials on a little table'.⁴⁵ Elsewhere, in common with the significance of reading featured in many literary fairy tales, direct references to books, reading, and literary tropes help to form key plot points and establish characterization. In 'The Adventures of Augustus', Sir Edward confesses his love for Lady Arabella, telling her, 'I have read in romances that people have formed an attachment from the first instant' (certainly the case in many Minervian tales).⁴⁶ And in 'The Effect of Love', the strong-willed heroine, Donna Luisa da Gloria, professes, 'And why should she not do great things & perhaps become Queen, as many stories had told her . . . Then she said to herself half aloud, Ah! But what stories, only novels, romances & Fairy tales!'⁴⁷ Like many Minervian characters, Donna Luisa is both in a fairy tale and aware of fairy tales. Characters are often as adept in their use of literary tropes as their industrious creators, just as, in another sense, literary activities and the shared understanding of literary tropes and conventions are at the heart of the Cowan girls' networks of sociability.

The children left no explicit explanation as to the naming of the library, but the inspiration behind it appears to be two-fold. Minerva, the goddess of wisdom, features in one of the stories and one of the plays and is also clearly represented in the library's crest, which depicted a helmet-wearing Minerva holding a spear. Above her head are two quill pens positioned as a cross, and an owl is at her feet.⁴⁸ But there are many indications that the girls were also familiar with the Minerva Press, the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century publishing house best known for printing sentimental romances and Gothic novels, usually by women writers.⁴⁹

In one of her later pencilled annotations, on the title page of 'Evangeline', the elderly Clara appears to corroborate a connection between the Minerva Press and the Minervian Library:

By C. Cowan when a young girl. In imitation, I believe, of the old fashioned novels such as Sir Charles Grandison[,] "The Children of the Abbey" etc I have added this note of explanation when an old Lady of Past 70!⁵⁰

Samuel Richardson's *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), although not published by Minerva, shares the epistolary style favoured by many of the press's authors (and one of Richardson's characters, the Marchese della Poretta, is echoed in 'Evangeline' in the figure of Lady Bernice della Poretta). *The Children of the Abbey* (1796), by the Irish novelist Regina

⁴⁵ Cowan, 'Evangeline', p. 3.

⁴⁶ Cowan and Cowan, 'Adventures of Augustus', p. 83.

⁴⁷ Cowan, 'The Effect of Love', p. 4.

⁴⁸ Holtom, 'The Library Damsels'; Maria and Clara Cowan, 'The King of Persia' (1865), features a Princess Minerva, GB/241/D98/1/5/5, and Minerva was a character in 'Semiramis', Advertisement, GB/241/D98/2/4/6.

⁴⁹ William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 244; Christina Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland, c. 1760–1829* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), Chapter 4.

⁵⁰ Cowan, 'Evangeline', p. 1.

Maria Roche, was one of the Minerva Press's most successful publications;⁵¹ a copy of the third edition (published by Minerva) was in the Baikie library in Tankerness House. Its presence in a family collection characterized by its debt to the fashionable literary marketplace of the day is indicative of the children's substantial but rather specific literary inheritance. The particular wording of Clara's note – 'In imitation of' and 'note of explanation' – suggests a purposeful act on the part of her childhood self ('Evangeline' also features a Sir Percival Everard Roche Delaucy and several Minervian characters are called Bingley, a key character in Roche's novel).⁵²

The connection to the Minerva Press is suggestive not only of the ambitions of the Minervian Library's founders, but also of their tastes and influences. Despite the popularity of some of its publications well into the nineteenth century, the Minerva Press had long been scorned by the literary establishment and condemned by critics.⁵³ Yet Elizabeth Neiman has recently argued that it offered subversive literary potential: Minerva authors, who were 'novel readers-turned-writers', 'fashion[ed] an actively collaborative model of authorship that enable[d] them to enter debates over women's nature, the social order, and the literary market'.⁵⁴ Certainly, the Cowan children developed their own 'collaborative model of authorship'. Moreover, the Minerva Press's 'admittedly derivative themes and otherwise borrowed material'⁵⁵ became doubly repurposed in their hands and were brought into the particular context of mid-nineteenth-century Orkney.

The geographical imaginaries of the Minervian tales are one significant facet here. Some of the girls in the Cowan social networks expressed a strong Scottish identity, on one occasion protesting against a teacher who taught from an Anglocentric history book.⁵⁶ How the Minervian authors identified themselves in terms of national belonging is not possible to discern, although despite their English background, England is often set up as a place of strangeness in their stories. In 'Evangeline', which comprises letters written between characters in Italy and England, Lady Violante di Treviso struggles to 'get used to English customs' despite being the daughter of an English mother. On arriving in London, she tells her friend 'it seems to me as if I were at the end of the world';⁵⁷ a figuration that recalls other Scottish texts 'that address their own situation at a nominal margin and do not assume that a nation radiates from its national capital'.⁵⁸ In Walter Scott's *Vacation 1814: Voyage in the Lighthouse Yacht to Nova Zembla, and the Lord Knows Where*, for example, 'north and south dissolve any stable order of priority'.⁵⁹ Scott's characterization of the archipelago may well have been familiar to the Minervians, not least because 'Mr. Baikie of Tankerness, a most respectable inhabitant of Kirkwall and an Orkney proprietor' is credited with supplying information on 'Norse fragments' in Scott's 1822 novel, *The Pirate*, inspired by his 1814 travels.⁶⁰ Many of the children's

⁵¹ See Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland*, pp. 159, 165–67.

⁵² Malcolm Cowan, 'Lord Henry Bingley' (1866), GB/241/D98/1/1/6.

⁵³ Morin, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland*, p. 156.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Neiman, *Minerva's Gothics: The Politics and Poetics of Romantic Exchange, 1780–1820* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019), p. xvi.

⁵⁵ Neiman, *Minerva's Gothics*, p. xv.

⁵⁶ Letter from Margaret Robertson to her brother Duncan Robertson, 24 May 1875, GB/241/D99/3/1/14.

⁵⁷ Cowan, 'Evangeline', p. 4.

⁵⁸ Penny Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography: North Britain 1760–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 130.

⁵⁹ Fielding, *Scotland and the Fictions of Geography*, p. 137.

⁶⁰ Walter Scott, *The Pirate* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1886 [1822]), pp. 460–62. See note 8 above for further possible influence of Scott on the children's writings.

works are set in Spain and Italy (the latter a location familiar to readers of the Gothic novel), or move between European locations. In this respect the authors may be situated within a broader Victorian publishing trend that celebrated the European literary fairy tale.⁶¹

The children's familiarity with a wide corpus of published fairy tales evidently derived in no small part from their acquaintance with the Minerva Press. The press had published a collection by the early eighteenth-century French writer Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, very similar in tone and style to a number of the Minervian pieces.⁶² One marked example of the manuscripts' generic playfulness and of the children's resourceful use of the textual is found in 'The Adventures of Augustus', co-authored by Clara and Mary (Figure 1). Beginning in a 'very wealthy estate in Wales' before shifting focus to France, where Augustus meets Flora Celina Laude, an 'exceedingly pretty young girl about sixteen',⁶³ the tale strategically appropriates and



Figure 1. Maria and Clara Cowan, 'The Adventures of Augustus', GB/241/D98/1/5/1. Reproduced by kind permission of Orkney Library and Archive.

⁶¹ Jack Zipes, Introduction to *Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves*, ed. by Zipes (New York, NY: Routledge, 1987), pp. xiii–xxix (p. xiv).

⁶² Madame d'Aulnoy, *The Fairest; or Surprising and Entertaining Adventures of the Aerial Beings . . . The Whole Selected to Amuse and Improve Juvenile Minds* (London: Minerva, for William Lane, 1795). David Blamires, 'From Madame d'Aulnoy to Mother Bunch: Popularity and the Fairy Tale', in *Popular Children's Literature in Britain*, ed. by Julia Briggs, Dennis Butt and M. O. Grenby (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 69–86 (p. 70).

⁶³ Cowan and Cowan, 'Adventures of Augustus', pp. 1, 3.

refashions the work of d'Aulnoy, who was known for incorporating verse into her prose tales.⁶⁴ Augustus and Flora's developing romance is endangered by the machinations of scheming servants (including the evocatively named Mrs Bag) and the dastardly Sir Henry Bingley (another outing for the Bingley name), before all is resolved and the relevant parties punished. The catalyst for the reunion between Augustus and Flora is a song, which Augustus hears Flora singing while out walking. Although the text gives no indication that the lyrics are not an original creation, it is fact taken verbatim from James Robinson Planché's 1855 translation of d'Aulnoy's 'The Hind in the Wood'.⁶⁵

The Minervians' deployment of d'Aulnoy's verse in their own story speaks to their clear knowledge of d'Aulnoy's work, and Planché's translation of it in particular (they must have had the volume to hand to have reproduced the words verbatim). But it also points towards their playful willingness to adapt their literary influences. The 'song' quoted is, in fact, not one piece of verse from 'The Hind in the Wood', but rather brings together sections from three different parts of the story. This bricolage-like rearrangement is not their only reworking of d'Aulnoy's material. In d'Aulnoy's original, one line refers to Louis XIV as 'the greatest king in the world', continuing 'There over France he ruled in peace profound'.⁶⁶ The Minervians replace 'France' with 'an estate', to refer to Augustus's family estate, ensuring that Flora's song fitted the characters and sorrows of their own story. This textual refashioning offers a cogent example of how the Minervians brought together tropes, generic features, and even whole sections of verse from across their reading to form something of their own. Like Planché, the Minervians were also translators of a sort, of Madame d'Aulnoy and others.

In other ways also, the children were participants in the evolution of fairy tale culture. A number of their works have oriental and Arabian references or settings, as does one of their plays, 'The King of Persia'.⁶⁷ They may have been familiar with Edward Lane's bowdlerized translation of *The One Thousand and One Nights*, which appeared in 1859 (although the Minervian manuscripts also include a partial transcription of Joseph Addison's eighteenth-century orientalist text, 'Visions of Mirza').⁶⁸ Their orientalist tales may have been further inspired by collections such as the German *Hauff's Fairy Tales* (which in turn also borrowed from the Arabian Nights). Scholars have identified the impact of German fairy tale collections upon works written for British children in this period.⁶⁹ However, the Minervian Library collection indicates that this was not simply a top-down process. Significantly, the children translated three of Hauff's tales.⁷⁰ By the 1860s, the literary fairy tale was flourishing in Britain, with periodical literature providing a further point of diversification. Readers and writers

⁶⁴ *Feathers, Paws, Fins and Claws: Fairy-Tale Beasts*, ed. by Jennifer Schacker and Christine Jones (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2015), p. 41.

⁶⁵ Paul Buczkowski, 'The First Precise English Translation of Madame d'Aulnoy's Fairy Tales', *Movels and Tales*, 23 (2009), 59–78.

⁶⁶ Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy, 'The Hind in the Wood', in *Fairy Tales, by the Countess d'Aulnoy*, trans. by J. R. Planché, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1856), p. 403.

⁶⁷ Cowan and Cowan, 'The King of Persia'. Another example is Clara Cowan, 'The Chain of Roses' (1867), GB/241/D98/1/2/3; GB/241/D98.

⁶⁸ Anon., 'A Vision of Mirza', GB/241/D98/1/4/2. Their exposure to eclectic sources is evident by the inclusion of a tale referencing the Aztec emperor, Guatemozin. 'Tantalus: The Son of Jupiter' in Anon., 'A Tale of the Western Chief and Other Stories' (1867), GB/241/D98/1/4/8.

⁶⁹ David Blamires, *Telling Tales: The Impact of Germany on English Children's Books, 1780–1918* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2009), Chapter 10.

⁷⁰ Mary and Clara Cowan's translations are 'The Story of the Ghost Ship', GB/241/D98/1/5/9; 'The Carriage', GB/241/D98/1/5; 'The Companion of a Journey' (1864–1865), GB/241/D98/1/4/14.

used the genre to speak to contemporary issues, including those related to science and evolution. There is even an example of a ‘Darwinian fairy tale’ in the Minervian collection.⁷¹

The children’s literary practices were typified then by a rootedness in aspects of European eighteenth-century literary culture, as well as participating in more up-to-date innovations of style and genre. This exemplified their self-presentation as sophisticated cultural actors, who allied themselves with national, and indeed continental, literary trends. In this respect, the Minervian Library provides significant insights into the children’s co-production of local class-based subjectivities. This period saw concerted efforts to reclaim Orkney’s rich Scottish and Norse story-telling traditions (Orkney was a Norwegian territory until 1468).⁷² Yet the Minervians eschewed the islands’ long-standing storytelling customs which were associated with the lower classes and they rarely drew upon the folklore of their Orcadian heritage.⁷³ At one point, the girls copied material from Norwegian legends, but their source here was not island folklore, but rather G. W. Dasent’s *Popular Tales from the Norse* (1859), a hugely successful publication amongst the Victorian reading public.⁷⁴ Indeed, the children’s range of geographical references tended to be outward-looking rather than rooted within their community. The one story that does have local allusions, Alfred Cowan’s ‘The Man-of-War: the Swan’, features a Scottish couple who, although they eventually settle in the ‘Hall of Tankerness Bay’, originally meet in Bengal.⁷⁵ Ruth Bottigheimer has insisted on the importance of a ‘book-based’ history of fairy tales, categorizing the European fairy tale as a product of the literate classes.⁷⁶ The Minervian Library creators, who positioned themselves firmly within this tradition, spoke to the cultivation of a cosmopolitan, elite perspective on the part of Orcadian middle-class youth.

4. GIRLHOOD

During the 1860s, writers increasingly used the fairy tale to insert new social narratives and this included experimenting with assertive female voices.⁷⁷ The Minervians’ oeuvre demonstrates that this was not simply an adult-led phenomenon. The girls appeared to enjoy dominant tropes of literary womanhood. Their heroines are generally beautiful, often victims, and frequently succumb to moral lessons. Nonetheless, several of the more carefully written stories feature less conventional heroines.

Clara Cowan’s ‘Evelina or the Maiden Chief’ is a notable case. Here, a daring peasant girl becomes a major player on the European power scene. Although the narrative reads like a swashbuckling adventure in places, Clara appears less interested in pursuing those elements of the plot; rather the action serves to establish Evelina’s forceful character and ability to inspire

⁷¹ Caroline Sumpter, *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), Chapter 3; ‘A Refutation of Darwin’s Theory of the Descent of Man’, GB/241/D98/2/1/1. This may date from a slightly later period than the bulk of the collection.

⁷² Simon W. Hall, ‘The History of Orkney Literature’ (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2009), pp. 35–44.

⁷³ At one point they appear to satirize the recent trend to capture local tales. ‘Reminiscence of Catty Maggie’ by an Old Girl, GB/241/D98/2/1/3. This is one of a group of loose sheets of papers which does not form part of the main collection.

⁷⁴ George Webbe Dasent, *Popular Tales from the Norse* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1859). The following appear in an 1864 booklet of ‘Stories by M and C Cowan’: ‘The Cat on the Dovrefell’; ‘Taming the Shrew’; ‘Doll in the Grass’, GB/241/D98/1/5/8.

⁷⁵ Alfred Cowan, ‘The Man-of-War: The Swan’ (1867), GB/241/D98/1/1/2.

⁷⁶ Ruth Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales: A New History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009).

⁷⁷ Zipes, Introduction, *Victorian Fairy Tales*, pp. xxv–vi; Zipes, *When Dreams Come True: Classic Fairy Tales and Their Tradition* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), p. 160.

multitudes of followers. Just as the narrative seems to be building towards a decisive moment of battle, we are told, 'It is not necessary to detail a fight which took place there. Suffice it to say it was wonderful & that there, through the skill and courage of Evelina, the fine & large army of the ennemy [sic] was completely destroyed.'⁷⁸ The tale ends with the pronouncement that 'Spain was not ashamed to have a peasant's daughter reigning over them, for they knew her worth . . . All those who do not believe this story because it is not recounted in the history of Spain neednt!⁷⁹ Clara's comic rebuttal of conventional history writing and those who value it enables her to claim authority for herself and her female characters, the tone recalling a more famous work of juvenilia: Jane Austen's spirited 'mock history', *The History of England . . . By a Partial, Prejudiced, & Ignorant Historian*.⁸⁰

In Mary Cowan's 'Derwent Melville', one of several stories rooted in the tradition of domestic fiction, the Melville siblings, Derwent and Anna, are left destitute by their parents' death and disinherited by their cruel elder brother. Across 23 chapters, the siblings battle their brother's various interferences, relocate from their Welsh home to Paris, and find paid work. Anna's enthusiasm at becoming a teacher is a striking element of the story. While Derwent views this prospect as evidence of the 'degradation we have fallen into', Anna asserts: 'I think it no degradation my dearest brother . . . to gain my bread in any honest way.'⁸¹ When she goes on to teach in a small school for young ladies, the narrative momentarily shifts to being an early example of the girls' school story (the heyday of which was not until much later), and includes an attempted pupil rebellion, which Anna ably sees down.

This brief interlude featuring unruly pupils is one of many points in the manuscripts in which an array of characters, subplots, and subgenres are kept in play. Although not always successful in managing these various strands, such moments indicate the far-ranging, inventive nature of the children's literary allusions. Often they are in the service of foregrounding themes of female independence. In 'To Gain His Love', two sisters take opposing approaches to winning a man's affections. Amelia decides she will visit the poor, refrain from flirting, dress simply, and, crucially, read no novels. Flora, however, decides to remain just as she is, 'as he may not love anything superficial in me'. Retaining both her novel reading and her independent mind, Flora is proven right and is reassured in the story's final words of her lover's 'Never-dying most Devoted Love'.⁸² Although many of the manuscripts end on notes of love and marriage, in the wider narratives romance is often secondary to the depiction of girlhood. It is less love itself and more the 'effect of love' (to recall the title of another story) on the lives and behaviour of strongminded heroines and on the friendships and rivalries of girlhood that most interests the Minervians.

The girls' plays demonstrate, perhaps even more than the novels, the extent to which the authors were knowingly engaging with contemporary debates about girlhood. Kristine Moruzi has shown how young female readers of mid-Victorian girls' magazines helped to shape public conversations about girlhood, through their interactions with the publications and correspondence columns.⁸³ The Minervian plays indicate a similar process was taking place in girls'

⁷⁸ Cowan, 'Evelina', p. 10.

⁷⁹ Cowan, 'Evelina', p. 11.

⁸⁰ Lynne Vallone, 'History Girls: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Historiography and the Case of Mary, Queen of Scots', *Children's Literature*, 36 (2008), 1–23 (p. 20, note 12).

⁸¹ Cowan, 'Derwent', p. 31.

⁸² Anon, 'To Gain his Love', pp. 4, 16.

⁸³ Kristine Moruzi, *Constructing Girlhood Through the Periodical Press, 1850–1915* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).

manuscript cultures. As Heather Fitzsimmons Frey has noted of the nineteenth-century practice of family plays and their popularity among young women, ‘At-home theatricals were one arena in which girls could test possible futures for themselves, and could imagine and practice different ways of being in the world.’⁸⁴

The Minervians’ performance on New Year’s Day, 1869, provides a clear example of the ways in which these authors experimented with, and contributed to, contemporary imaginings of girlhood. Their handbill indicates that the entertainment included ‘Proserpine or Striking a Match’. This boasted a comic engagement with various representations of girlhood. The dramatis personae included: ‘Proserpine. Daughter of Ceres whom she disobeys when didn’t ought-ter’; ‘Belle of Belles who likes to be told and chimes in with everybody’; ‘Minerva. The Goddess of Wisdom who is dumb to all young lady like feelings’; and ‘Diana. “A Girl of the Period” who being Goddess of Hunting likes to be thought chaste.’⁸⁵ The reference to the ‘Girl of the Period’ is undoubtedly a pointed one: the term was ubiquitous in the press at the time thanks to Eliza Lynn Linton’s controversial 1868 *Saturday Review* article of that name.⁸⁶ Linton provocatively lamented the loss, as she perceived it, of the ‘fair young English girl’ of bygone decades in favour of the modern ‘Girl of the Period’, who preferred fashion, flirtation, and vanity over domestic virtues. As Moruzi observes, the debate indicated ‘a deep anxiety about the control that girls are assuming over their own lives . . . articulating a more complex reality of girlhood that is comprised of multiple models of femininity.’⁸⁷

The Minervians’ appropriation of this term certainly suggests their knowledge of topical debates about girlhood. The aligning of Diana, goddess of hunting and associated with chastity, to the scandalous Girl of the Period may simply be ironic, but it could also signal the Minervians’ rejection of Linton’s characterization of their generation of girlhood. In the inaugural issue of *Girl’s Realm* magazine, editor Alice Corkran recalled that as a girl she had believed ‘there was no foundation for [Linton’s] savage onslaught, and that the writer had created a monster on purpose to slay it’. Corkran proposed to reclaim the term via her editorial column, ‘Chat with the Girl of the Period.’⁸⁸ It may be that the Minervians’ bringing together of this ‘monster’ with classical figures of antiquity enacted a similar form of reclamation, one that was just as public given they were putting their Girl of the Period on the stage for public consumption.

Perhaps in further defiance of nostalgic ideals of submissive young womanhood, the play also involved inventive cross-dressing. Seven-year-old Alfred Cowan had a role as ‘Arethusa. One of the Nereids who makes herself most ridiculous by her interference’; whilst two of the girls in the group took on male roles, including as ‘Pluto who coming from the warming climate is naturally of a fiery nature’. The Minervian Library circle therefore presented to their community a lively and subversive array of gendered roles. These multiple depictions of girlhood reflected, but also contributed to, wider commentaries on girls’ lives occurring in print culture, from periodicals and newspapers to the heroines of novels and fairy tales. In presenting these interventions to multiple audiences, via plays and stories, the Minervian

⁸⁴ Heather Fitzsimmons Frey, “‘A Place Where It Was Acceptable to Be Unacceptable’: Twenty-First-Century Girls Encounter Nineteenth-Century Girls Through Amateur Theatricals and Dance”, *Journal of Childhood Studies*, 44 (2019), 85–105 (p. 87).

⁸⁵ Advertisement, GB/241/D98/2/4/6.

⁸⁶ See Moruzi, *Constructing Girlhood*, Chapter 3.

⁸⁷ Moruzi, *Constructing Girlhood*, p. 1.

⁸⁸ Alice Corkran, ‘Chat with the Girl of the Period’, *Girl’s Realm*, 1 (1898–1899), 216.

authors indicated a cognizance of the significance of such representations beyond their own imaginations and immediate peer group.

5. CONCLUSION

The Minervian manuscripts are evidence that children could play an active role in the Victorian development of the fairy tale, not only as intended readers, but as authors. In her work on later Victorian girls' manuscript magazines, Lois Burke notes how contributors 'wrote themselves into print culture.'⁸⁹ In producing an actual library, the Minervian children 'wrote themselves' and their social circle into a circulating manuscript print culture that represented and fostered particular cultural ideals. The theatricals further indicate that the Minervian children were proficient in an assortment of writing practices, many of which assumed, or aspired to, circulation well beyond the familial.

None of the authors of the Minervian Library appears to have gone on to write in later life. Clara and Isabella both married and had children with middle-class professional men. Mary appears not to have married, or at least not by the time of the 1881 census at which point she was still living with her parents in Kirkwall. Whereas Clara eventually settled in Enfield, Isabella remained close to the island community. Having twice married, by 1911 she was living back in Orkney. Malcolm died in 1889, but his brothers William and Alfred both became lairds in due course.⁹⁰

The significance of the Minervian Library lies not in tracing its authors' trajectories to their adult selves, but in unearthing its meanings to the producers and consumers of its works in the 1860s. Previous accounts of Victorian juvenilia emphasize its parodic style and content, noting the creative ways that children appropriate aspects of adult-authored literature.⁹¹ The Minervian Library endorses this observation. Despite the girls' avowal that the Minervian Library was originally 'instituted for the personal amusement, of Miss I.M.B. Bremner & the Misses M. & C. Cowan',⁹² their output indicates how, in their appropriation of literary traditions, especially the European literary fairy tale, the children's creative practices contributed to particular processes and social relationships. For example, this was a period in which historians of Orkney have noted a greater alienation between the lairds and their tenants.⁹³ In privileging the European fairy tale over local customs and storytelling, the children were constitutive of the cultural landscape of the Orcadian elite.

The enjoyment of these works across a wide network, inclusive in terms of its age and gender profile, suggests a liberal attitude towards cultural production. Child-authored material was ubiquitous within the contemporary literary market and it was not necessarily assumed that youthful writing would be consumed only by a young audience.⁹⁴ Rather than understanding the Minervian juvenilia primarily through the figure of 'the child', it is helpful therefore to focus upon the ways in which it demonstrates the richness and complexity of Orcadian cultural life in this period. Girls' self-directed activities, such as the Minervian Library, could have considerable reach in co-producing the landscape of Victorian intellectual and sociable

⁸⁹ Burke, "Meantime, it is Quite Well to Write", p. 732.

⁹⁰ Hugh Marwick, 'The Baikies of Tankerness', *Orkney Miscellany*, 4 (1957); Wilson, *Profit Not Loss*.

⁹¹ Christine Alexander, 'Nineteenth-Century Juvenilia: A Survey', in *The Child Writer*, pp. 11–30, p. 17; Jan Susina, "'Respiciendo Prudens': Lewis Carroll's Juvenilia", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 17 (1992), 10–14.

⁹² 'Annals'.

⁹³ Thomson, *The New History of Orkney*, pp. 389, 400.

⁹⁴ Laurie Langbauer, *The Juvenile Tradition: Young Writers and Prolepsis, 1750–1835* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Jane B. Wilson, *Children's Writings: A Bibliography of Works in English* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1982).

life. In this respect our analysis contributes to a growing body of scholarship which demonstrates the dynamism and significance of girlhood culture.⁹⁵ Zboray and Zboray's exploration of the ways in which antebellum readers in America 'refashioned ideas gleaned from literature into webs of local knowledge that was spun out through social ties' is also highly apposite here. As they demonstrate, through communal reading and writing practices, and the creative repurposing of literary texts, amateur writers helped to 'maintain a world of social relations'. In terms of an immediate impact on one's local community, therefore, in some cases amateur writers 'achieved far more than even the most renowned authors.'⁹⁶ The example of the Minervian Library testifies that as acts of social authorship, juvenilia similarly had the potential to materially contribute to specific and significant aspects of Victorian culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Jill Shefrin for bringing this collection to our attention; Orkney Library and Archive, and especially Lucy Gibbon, for their extensive assistance; and Orkney Museum for hosting an exhibition on the Minervian Library. We are grateful to the participants of the Knowledge Exchange Workshop on the Minervian Library, Institute for Northern Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands, Kirkwall, Orkney, 21 March 2017 hosted by Prof. Donna Heddle. Ragnhild Ljosland, Sheila Garson, Bryce Wilson, Tom Muir, and Kathleen Keldie provided further insights into Orcadian culture and/or assisted in identifying individuals. Geraldine Porter transcribed key works. All errors remain our own.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

FUNDING

This work was supported by a grant from the Knowledge Exchange Fund, TORCH, University of Oxford.

⁹⁵ For example, Hannah Charnock, 'Teenage Girls, Female Friendship and the Making of the Sexual Revolution in England, 1950–1980', *Historical Journal*, 63 (2020), 1032–53; Beth Rodgers, *Adolescent Girlhood and Literary Culture at the Fin de Siècle: Daughters of Today* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Kathryn Gleadle, 'The Juvenile Enlightenment: British Children and Youth During the French Revolution', *Past and Present*, 233 (2016), 143–84.

⁹⁶ Zboray and Zboray, *Everyday Ideas*, pp. xvii, 69.