READING THE CHILD AUTHOR IN *THE ADVENTURES OF ALICE LASELLES BY ALEXANDRINA VICTORIA (AGED 10¾)*

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ONCE UPON a time, a young girl called Alexandrina Victoria wrote a story. She titled it *Alice* and "affectionately and dutifully inscribed" it, her "first attempt at composition," to her "dear mama" (2). The story itself, written some time around 1829, is about a girl called Alice and her adventures at a boarding school for select young women. Her initial departure from home is painful and unsought, but her stepmother is insistent upon school: Alice will be "much happier … among other girls" (10) and is to stay there for six years until she will be "of an age to … go out in company" (10). Upon her arrival at the school, Alice is introduced to the Headmistress, Mrs. Duncombe, thereafter referred to as Mrs. D, and her fellow students in a series of individual vignettes. Alice makes friends with two girls in particular, the "quite delightful" team of Selina and Ernestine (47), before then coming into conflict with another pupil, Diana, who claims Alice has brought a cat to school without permission. Upset at this challenge to her character, and indeed at the fact that she has "never even had a cat" (48), Alice emotionally consoles herself with the knowledge that the truth will out and her honour will be restored. With some narrative alacrity, the culprit then confesses and Alice's innocence is established. She rises the next morning with "a light heart" and, as the conclusion to the book recounts, "in less than 3 months" becomes "one of the best learners in the school" (56). Almost one hundred and eighty years later, long after Alexandrina Victoria had become better known as Queen Victoria and begun her lengthy and definitive reign over the United Kingdom, *Alice* was republished by the Royal Collection Trust as *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* (2015).

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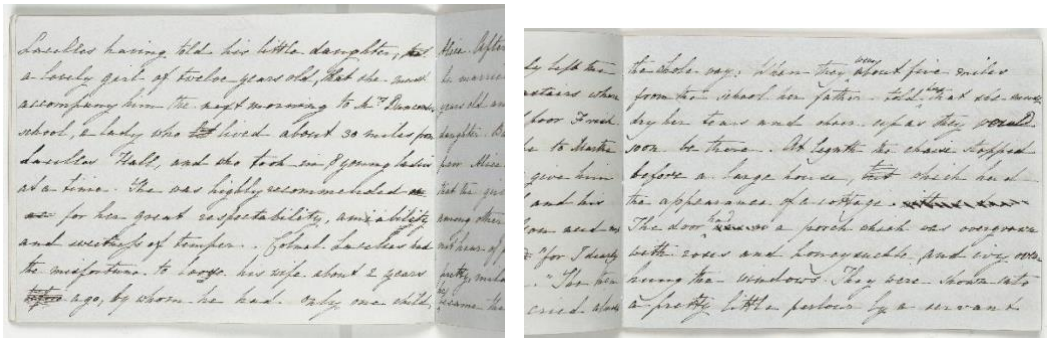
In this article, I discuss the journey of original manuscript to publication. For purposes of clarity, I refer to the original version of the text as *Alice* and to the edited, published version as *The Adventures of Alice Laselles*. I also suggest that the original *Alice* was written c. 1829, a conclusion that sits at odds with the publisher and indeed, the readings of other scholars. This is due to a number of reasons, the first being found in *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* itself. The cover copy states that the original story was written by Alexandrina Victoria "aged 10¾." An afterword expands upon this: "We think Queen Victoria wrote this story when she was just coming up to her eleventh birthday" ("Story" 58), and there is further mention of Victoria's age in a second afterword about paper dolls: "We think Queen Victoria made these paper dolls in about 1830—about the same time as she wrote down the story of Alice's adventure" ("Paper Dolls" 60). Victoria was born on 24 May 1819, and thus her eleventh birthday would have been 24 May 1830. If we accept that Victoria was 10¾ when she wrote *Alice*, then this would position its composition somewhere between January and March of that year. This is not impossible by any means, yet I would suggest that stories do not begin at the point of writing out a clean copy. This book is published from a noticeably neat and clean manuscript, which reveals upon inspection few if any edits or visible mistakes (Figs. 1 and 2). Such texts take their time in production and may have had many earlier, untidier versions of themselves consigned to the dustbin.



Figures 1 and 2. Princess Victoria, ms. of "Alice," p. 2 (Fig. 1, left). Princess Victoria, ms. of "Alice," p. 7 (Fig. 2, right); note the edits. (Royal Archives | His Majesty King Charles III).

Lynne Vallone, one of the few other scholars to have engaged with *Alice* as an object of scholar interest, offers an alternative perspective upon the story's year of composition. She suggests that it was written when Victoria was fifteen years old, "circa 1835" (138). For rationale, she cites the text's stylistic qualities and the author's ability to sustain a lengthy narrative (129), as well as the practical circumstances that writing such a lengthy story would require: "It is likely that Victoria wrote it while

travelling and released from her usual rigid lesson schedule as was the case for her 'Sophia and Adolphus' story written in Broadstairs" (138).[1] Again, this is not impossible by any means, but my own experience of working with young writers (Johnson) has shown that girls as young as ten write and do so at length (indeed, many of the participants in my study were chidden for writing too much). Furthermore, it is not a reach to see a young writer from privileged circumstances producing a lengthy work such as *Alice*. Taking all of this into account, then, I date *Alice*'s composition as c. 1829.

I also spell Alice's surname differently, depending on whether I am referring to the original or the republished text. This is due to the fact that in the original story, the surname of Alice is spelt "Lascelles," whilst in the newer edition, *The Adventures of Alice Laselles*, the 'c' has been dropped and Alice's surname has become "Laselles."[2] As I discuss below, this is a small yet impactful edit upon the text that has lasting resonance. In an attempt to not reinforce this impact and, indeed, as an act of fidelity to the text as written, I retain Alexandrina Victoria's original spelling of the surname whenever I quote from the manuscript.

Finally, these clarifications about style and terminology may seem to link this article firmly with the work of an individual young author and the journey of an individual text towards publication. It is important to emphasise that this is not so. This is the story of how a young author, profoundly influential both in her child and adult life, remained yet unable to escape the "complex games" (Watson 53) of meaning-making that adults sometimes play about a child-authored text, often for purposes of publicity or marketing.

"A Children's story written and illustrated by Queen Victoria"

BOUND in pale pink candy-stripe cloth, *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* is an eye-catching volume (Fig. 3). The title is printed in gilt lettering, wrapped in a wreath of pink flowers, and crowned with a small image, reminiscent of a Victorian cameo brooch, of a girl holding a cat in her arms. Upon reading, it becomes clear that this girl is the titular Alice, but the first impression is that she might be the young Victoria herself looking out at the reader. Indeed, such an interpretation is only helped by the autobiographical detail added to the cover: the front proclaims that this is *The Adventures of Alice Laselles by Alexandrina Victoria aged 10¾* with the strapline "A Children's story written and illustrated by Queen Victoria." The back cover describes it as "An enchanting children's story written by a real princess" and "A delightful and

unique children's story, which will still enchant and captivate every little princess today."

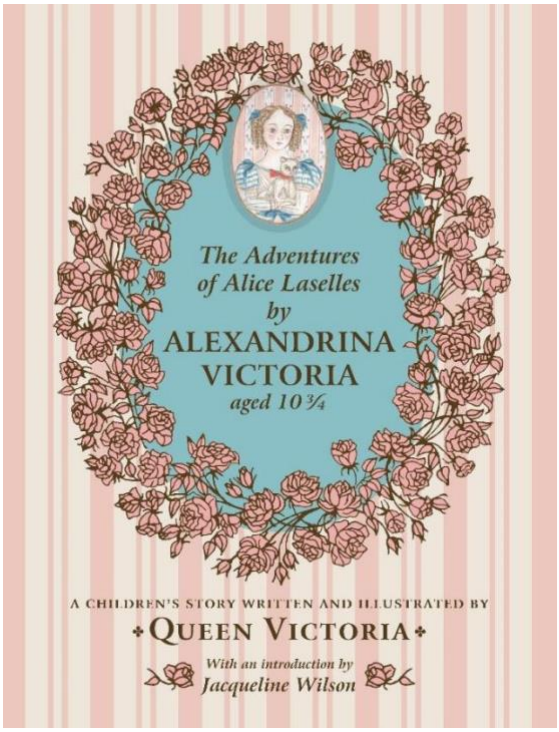


Figure 3. Front cover of The Adventures of Alice Laselles, *2015 (© Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2024 | Royal Collection Trust).*

It is in this soft pink statement of purpose that *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* both asserts the identity of its author whilst also confessing some sense of confusion about the same. The invocation of Queen Victoria on the cover is understandable: this is a story written by a pivotal figure in British history, and that identity clearly influenced The Royal Collection Trust's decision to republish this story in the first place. Name recognition is important: publishing is a commercial business. It is also understandable that the names of Alexandrina Victoria and Queen Victoria are so intimately linked together. They are the same person: the child grew up to become the adult; the princess became the queen; this much is true. Yet, underneath this truth, there is a hint of something friable, something much more unsure: a hint of a book being written simultaneously by both the young Victoria and the old, by a young girl in the process of becoming monarch and the monarch herself, whose name even in this context is resonant with the legacied history of her position.

Because of this simultaneity, as much as the peritextual material included with *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* serves to dislocate Victoria from her childhood, it also works to quite deliberately fix her there. Her age is emphasised on the front cover: she is "aged 10¾" and thus quite clearly a child. This is no new phenomenon for a young author, and I do not seek to characterise it as such here. Rather, I seek to unpack how this precise delineation of age and underscoring of Victoria's position as *child* sits alongside the other material on a cover which simultaneously proclaims her as adult. I would suggest that, at the very least, this results in a state of tension. She is an author fixed in the state of becoming, on the cusp of an imminent birthday and of maturity, both young and old, and somehow all of these things at the same time. Furthermore, she is an author whose peculiarly specific age has noticeable echoes across literature: Sue Townsend's fictional young author, Adrian Mole, for example, had his diaries published at age 13¾, while Platform 9¾ is a key location in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007). In describing Victoria as 10¾ years old when she wrote *Alice,* then, the 2015 title connects Victoria to these literary landmarks in a way that asserts *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* to be pivotal, weighty, part of the literary firmament; and indeed, every element of the book's cover design works to secure and handfast that reading.

However this careful delineation and emphasis of Victoria's age rests upon delicate foundations: the age of the author is an estimate. This uncertainty is not revealed until the reader reaches the afterword of *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* where we learn that the editors only "*think* Queen Victoria wrote this story" at the age given and find no reasons given ("Story" 58, emphasis added). At one level, this is an understandable and necessary caveat to give under the circumstances; the original manuscript of *Alice* is undated. Yet on another level, this afterword also hints at the contentious role that authorial age can play in juvenilia, beginning with the editing process. Sylvia Molloy, for example, describes how the mother of nineteenth-century diarist Marie Bashkirtseff shifted her age from fourteen to twelve years old when her diaries were published. This was, Molloy suggests, the act of a "shrewd impresario" who, in making her daughter younger than she was, sought to emphasise Marie's precocity for marketing purposes (13). Thinking of age, and indeed the fixing of it, as an editorial act made with commercial intent allows us to read Victoria's age as a sign of imminence; such an editorial decision emphasises how close she is to her adulthood and her ascendance into the monarchy: the becoming, become. This then allows the idea of her adult celebrity, as represented on that cover and in the additional authorial material, to start making meaning: her childhood work has become of interest due to her subsequent adult achievements; the one informs the other. The

front and back covers of *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* suggest and indeed facilitate this adult-centred reading of a young author's work.

So too do this edition's illustrations. As originally written, *Alice* was without illustrations. A case might be made for its in-text edits as visual matter, consisting as they do of small arrows that accompany insertions, deletions, and corrections, but the matter of intent is relevant here: the author's intent is to amend and correct the text rather than provide illustrations. Yet upon its republication, *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* as one afterword notes in its unidentified voice "had to have illustrations" ("Story" 58), and so it did. A similarly anonymous foreword provides further information on the visual material. It was "created by four very different people: firstly Queen Victoria and her governess Baroness Lehzen; and secondly Cristina Pieropan and Felix Petruška" (Foreword 2). This quartet draws together a number of individuals across the boundaries of both age and time; Pieropan and Petruška are contemporary artists, contributing towards the project in the present day, while Baroness Lehzen, the childhood governess of the young Victoria, is described as having drawn the dolls out for Victoria to then paint (ibid.). Victoria herself is the only child to be mentioned, though an additional anonymous afterword on "Alexandrina Victoria's Paper Dolls" does acknowledge that other young people may have been involved, such as Princess Feodora of Leiningen (Victoria's maternal half-sister, born December 1807) and Victoire Conroy (born August 1819), the daughter of Sir John Conroy, comptroller for Victoria's mother the Duchess of Kent and her household (60–61).

Many years after their initial painting by Victoria and her peers, the dolls were then remade into illustrative matter for *The Adventures of Alice Laselles*. They were first "digitally cut out and manipulated" by Felix Petruška, using a process that involved "changing their poses and expressions and" adding "shadows to give them a more three-dimensional appearance" (Foreword 2). Following this reworking, the paper dolls were then set into scenes where they were given depth and texture by the delicate, sensitive etchings of Cristina Pieropan. The result is a charming amalgamation of historic and contemporary artforms which sees the paper dolls lean into each other, gossiping and chatting on a sofa in the school's living room, or leaning over the staircase to whisper something in their headmistress's ear, their formerly fixed existence forgotten. Yet there are also illustrations which recognise the inescapable flatness of the paper dolls even within this new, vibrant landscape, and do so with profound impact. One of the most impressive demonstrations of this illustrates the moment when Colonel Lascelles and his daughter arrive at the school for the very first time (Fig. 4). The paper doll playing the part of her father stares fixedly ahead, unable to even look at his daughter, while Alice, all fluid line and

movement, stares sorrowfully at the floor, lost in her feelings. There is an eloquent poignancy at play here: Alice may be with her father, but emotionally, they are miles apart.

Figure 4. Alice sits with her father in the school parlour, The Adventures of Alice Laselles, *p. 18 (© Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2024 | Royal Collection Trust).*

Under these circumstances, the claim that *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* is a "children's story written and illustrated by Queen Victoria" becomes something of a provocation, for there were many other parties involved, especially when the publishing process and all its stakeholders are considered. Yet this story *is* clearly illustrated by Victoria. Dolls were part of her childhood play, and the dolls that were selected to feature in *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* were part of a wider cast, both two- and three-dimensional, who, as Frances H. Low put it in 1892, "made happy the childhood of her who is endeared to her subjects as a good wife, a good mother, and a wise and exemplary ruler" (238). The dolls reflected experiences that Victoria had had in her life and came to function as something of an embodied, physicalised

journal. After a performance of *Les Sylphides,* for example, Victoria made a "series of lively drawings and water-colours in her sketchbook" before "Baroness Lehzen made" her "a doll to represent Taglioni as La Sylphide." At some point, this doll was then "married" to "another, which she and the Baroness dressed and named Count Almaviva (from the character in *The Barber of Seville*)," and gained "two baby daughters" ("Queen Victoria's Dolls" n.p.) As an adult, Victoria even went as far as providing clarifying and explanatory footnotes upon media articles about her collection of dolls (Low 11). By the time of her death, dolls had become irrevocably associated with her, part of her mythos and iconography. Any representation of them in the media was a representation of the monarch; for this reason, making them the source of new illustrations for *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* is an act of strategic marketing. Victoria's established iconography is reaffirmed; the dolls are positioned once more as a way of understanding the monarch, and Victoria's childhood identity is foregrounded.

These ideological exertions around meaning-making, and the shadowy adult bodies that lie behind them, are a familiar sight in the field of juvenilia studies. For example, in describing the process of editing a child-authored text, Christine Alexander remarks: "As Humpty Dumpty said, it is a question of mastery over the conventions of language and therefore meaning" ("Defining" 81). The visual materials published with *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* are clear expressions of mastery over the text. They bring with them the exertions of adult bodies, laden with their own agendas, and the resonance of the wider, established discourse about the author. Individual games become played: contemporary artists learn how to negotiate historical material and media and integrate this into their own creative practice, while an institutional press must grapple with a key member of the institution which they serve and work out how to, and indeed whether they even *can*, represent such a figure and all of her significance in print. Yet these multiple-bodied efforts towards mastery, towards the shaping of meaning, also achieve quite the opposite; they diffuse it, share it, and work to minimise any sense of original ownership by the original author upon their text.

It might be productive here to clarify the difference between the interventions that I have discussed and the more general process of editing literary material. Texts, both child-authored and adult-authored, are edited prior to their publication. More than one person is involved and their own purposes drive their efforts, be that a line edit, or a more thematic, large-scale structural edit. This process is an important and common part of the publication journey: the literary object rarely enters the world fully formed and ready for public readership. I do not seek to deny the benefits of these often fruitful and productive encounters between author and editor, text and

publisher, nor to make a value judgement of the edits applied to *Alice*. What I am working towards instead is a kind of mapping, a tracing, of how those edits have injected a peculiar kind of force into the text, the impact of that force, and how it both serves and undermines the author.

"I think you'll agree that she was very talented"

ONE OF the key additions to *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* is a foreword by Jacqueline Wilson. Forewords can act as a curious hybrid of provenance and value marker for child-authored texts (see Walker, amongst many others), and this one is no exception. Wilson is a well-established author within British children's literature with a prolific back catalogue of titles and is a former Children's Laureate (2005–07). The position of Laureate is held for two years and devoted to advocacy for children's literacy and literature across the United Kingdom. In addition to her professional standing and notable literary achievements, Wilson has featured paper dolls in her own creative work and has often spoken about her childhood fondness for playing with them (Duncan). Her foreword to *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* sees her write about how she "loved playing with paper dolls" (4) and how she "was delighted and astonished to discover that the most famous of all Victorians, Queen Victoria herself, also loved paper dolls" (5). She writes that Victoria's "governess drew them [the dolls] for her, but the young Victoria coloured them in herself. I think you'll agree that she was very talented" (5). Wilson also uses her foreword to comment on Victoria's skill as a writer. She notes that *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* "ends happily, if a little hurriedly. Victoria was obviously keen to get to the end of her story. I know the feeling!" and writes that "If Victoria hadn't been destined to be Queen I think she might have made a remarkable novelist" (5). The text itself, read from a contemporary perspective, supports this assertion: Victoria is clearly a good writer, both confident in style and prolific in output. Indeed, contemporary reviews of *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* pick out her eye for "resonant detail" and her "ear for dialogue" (Hensher), and indeed, the accusation of Alice by her new headmistress provides a clear demonstration of both:

> "Why I have just heard from Barbara Somerville that you have placed a cat in my kitchen without previously enquiring from me if such a thing was allowed. Now I never permit any cat whatsoever to be in the kitchen or the house and particularly not without permission.

> I shall therefore beg of you my dear Alice to send your cat home to Laselles Hall."
>
> "Indeed Mam I never even had a cat for Pappa does not like them, and as for venturing to bring a cat into your house, I never dreamt of doing so undutiful a thing, indeed Mam it is not my cat."

At this point, the misinformed Barbara becomes involved:

> "Well then Miss Benson our teacher must tell a lie for it was she who told me that she saw the cat with a piece of red ribbon round its next on which was written Alice Laselles," retorted Barbara.
>
> "No no I never brought one, somebody must have done so out of malice, out of pure unkindness, to a pure helpless stranger," sobbed out poor Alice. (48)

This is a dynamic moment between three parties, one of the longest episodes of conversation within the text, and one which gives each character her own clear identity, motive and agenda within moments of her speaking. Mrs. D's adult authority is respectfully noted and affirmed; Barbara's information is recognised as being based on hearsay and thus her lack of character is established, and Alice's quick, repeated denials ("I never … I never"; "No no I never") serve to reinforce her inner nobility and her passionate commitment to the truth. Details like the red ribbon with Alice's name on it emphasise the drama; this is a writer working to catch the reader's eye, a writer who knows precisely what she is doing.

Victoria continued to write regularly into her adulthood and up to 1901, the year of her death. At this point, she had written somewhere over one hundred and forty-one volumes of a detailed personal journal and somewhere over an estimated sixty million words. Her style was purposeful, precise, and occasionally possessed of a delicate and moving introspection as her diary entry for 10 February 1840, the day of her wedding, shows: "How can I ever be thankful enough, to have such a Husband! May God help me to do my duty as I ought & to be worthy of such blessings!" As a young woman, she was familiar with literary culture and more than comfortable in expressing a judgement upon her reading. On 25 August 1835, she is read to from Madame de Sévigné's letters[3] and writes in her diary about "how truly elegant and natural her style is! It is so full of naivete, cleverness and grace," a topic she returns to over a year later. Here Victoria notes that they are reading the "middle of the 10th vol." of the letters and, as she reflects, "I like them more and more, they are so beautiful, so easy, they show the character of the person who wrote them so perfectly,

you become acquainted with her and hers, and there are such tender and beautiful feelings expressed in them, towards that daughter who was her all & all; and the style is so elegant and so beautiful" (27 October 1836).

The point here is perhaps self-evident: Victoria wrote, lengthily and well, as both child and adult. She was a prolific correspondent and, for example, wrote so many letters to her newly married daughter in Germany that her husband felt it necessary to intervene for the sake of her health (Hibbert 258). She also published several full-length literary projects of her own, most notably *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands* (1865) and its sequel: *More Leaves From the Journal of Our Life In The Highlands* (1884). These titles drew upon the resource of Victoria's personal diaries and shared the details of royal life in Scotland with a hungry public readership. They were a notable public success (O'Neill) and shone a spotlight on the royal domesticity and its sometimes uneasy, self-conscious performance. Victoria also wrote an unpublished memoir-cum-tribute about her servant John Brown (Hibbert; Lamont-Brown) and was even later nominated, perhaps somewhat ambitiously, as the possible secret author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through The Looking Glass* (Rosenbaum).

The Adventures of Alice Laselles demonstrates Victoria's talent as a writer, even as a young girl. For example, upon her arrival at school, Alice unpacks a "small red case" which holds a lock of her mother's hair (25). As she tells her new headmistress:

> "About two months before my poor Mamma died she cut off a long piece of her beautiful black hair, and as she could plait very well she made it into this string and put a lock of her hair into this locket. Well, when she felt her last moment approaching she called me faintly to her bed, and taking this string and locket from her neck said, 'This is my work, my hair—and my last gift. Always keep it by you and always remember your dying mother's last words.'" (25)

As this passage shows, Victoria could be moralising in nature, not particularly subtle in making her point, and yet could still do so with style and occasional panache. The deathbed scene is a more than familiar friend to readers of literature from this period, and the incident here is presented with style and "resonant detail" (Hensher), not least in that description of the locket itself and its accompanying case. As in the passage quoted above, Victoria uses the colour red to signify objects of narrative importance: here, the red case; there, the ribbon around the cat's neck. The locket unmistakeably represents an intimate relationship; despite her obvious absence, Alice's mother is still very much present in her daughter's life.

It is also noticeable that Alice tells this intimate and profoundly personal story only after the gentle enquiries of her new headmistress, Mrs. D. It is she who, when noticing Alice's locket, asks: "What is this my love?" and in response to Alice's offer to tell her the story of it, replies, "I should like it very much my dear" (25). In this tender prompting, the subsequent telling, and indeed the respectful listening, Mrs. D's goodness is underscored; she is a new and positive maternal figure within Alice's life, a counterpoint to the stepmother Victoria suffered under at home.

This exploration of parenting, both good and bad, is a recurrent theme within the book. For example, Alice is able to recognise the machinations of her new stepmother behind her departure for school and, in doing so, see her father's weakness: "[Y]oung Mrs Laselles did not like poor Alice. She always hinted to her husband that the girl would be much happier at school among other girls"; once "he became the father of a second little girl and Mrs Laselles told him he neglected both mother and daughter for Alice, he weakly consented to send her to school for six years" (10). The theme persists: "At last Colonel Laselles called her to say goodbye to her unworthy and selfish stepmother." But Victoria explains that "Alice was not so much of a child not to see that her departure was the work of her stepmother" (14). This emotional acuity reoccurs elsewhere; in a series of individual character sketches which introduce the girls of the school, Victoria writes for example that Barbara Somerville has "been longest in the school, and consequently claims our attention first" (30) and that the beautiful Charlotte Graves "paid proper attention to her lessons but all her leisure time was employed in arranging her curls with the greatest care" (34). She even abandons her normally fulsome style for the occasional witty aside: "Laura and Adelaide Burtin were twins and had arrived but 4 months. They had been sent by their parents who were gone to India, to remain only for a year. They were unoffending good sort of girls" (37).

The Adventures of Alice Laselles is also a story with a predominantly female cast that works to remove these characters from the wider world so that they can study and live alongside each other and develop passionate, heartfelt friendships in the process. In doing so, the story also reads as something of an intriguing early example of the girls' school story genre. Yet the joys of collective education alongside her friends were unfamiliar to Victoria herself, and the impact of her lonely and regimented childhood manifests itself in curious, subtle ways in her work. Many of the girls in *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* come from complex home circumstances and have experienced a childhood of neglect. They have been sent away to school and have been there ever since. Diana O'Reilly, for example, has been abandoned by her father for ten years while he grieves the death of his wife who died in childbirth. The orphaned Selina Bawden has only a "rich unmarried uncle who disliked children"

(40), while another orphan, Ernestine Duval, has been sent away to school by her "rather poor" Uncle who has "many children of his own to provide for" (33). For these characters, the school is a space of sanctuary and the other girls, a family. They sit companionably "around a large oaken table" where they are read to; and once the book is finished, they are allowed their own amusements "till-bed time" (53). The suspicion that the author sought something of the companionship of collective education and easy, positive friendships for herself is hard to escape. As this double page spread (Fig. 5) shows, Alice sits by herself on the verso page and watches the girls dance; her isolation is felt, not just in terms of practical remove but also in terms of medium. The other pupils are all repurposed paper dolls and thus of a uniform appearance while Alice is not. She hides her face from the reader, lost in her homesickness and misery, while the paper dolls look out from the page, united by their collective joy. In the background lurks the soon-to-be problem of the white cat, wearing a red ribbon.

Figure 5. Alice watches the girls dance, from The Adventures of Alice Laselles*, pp. 44–45 (© Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2024 | Royal Collection Trust).*

Despite Alice's being accused of an initial wrongdoing at school, the real culprit is discovered and punished with little to no input from or impact on Alice herself. As Ernestine, a fellow pupil, informs her, "'Mrs. D has found out the whole, the mystery is disclosed and your innocence is proved. Trivial as the occurrence about the cat appeared, our dear good governess always makes a point to find out the truth, so accordingly we were all assembled, Miss Benson and Nanny the cook also, Di alone

was not forthcoming and can you believe it, O Alice she was the culprit"' (50). Alice's response to this chatty screed is, it might be noted, exquisitely brief: "Really" (53). She then turns her attention towards making friends, thriving and flourishing; and the other girls, save Di and Barbara, "who protected Di" (53), welcome her with "open arms." This is recorded in a full double-page spread illustration, which depicts the girls chatting and playing together in a large salon. Two girls whisper on the sofa together while another two play a game of cards on a small table. Mrs. D, the headmistress, sits by the fire, while another girl stands hand in hand with her friend. The overall impression is of warm hominess.

It is hard to resist making a connection between these moments of togetherness and Victoria's own, lonely childhood. Indeed, Vallone writes that Victoria's "perhaps spoiled upbringing by an obsessive widow, her wide reading in improving literature, her appreciation of romance and dedication to life-writing in her journals—invites these conjectures about the connection between the young author and the female characters she created" (143). Yet if these connections are rendered so palpably, with such yearning, within the text, should such a reading of them be resisted? The young author seems to grapple with the inevitability of such inferences in the representation of Alice's stepmother, where she seeks to negate any potential critical reception. The new Mrs. Lascelles is a complicated, challenging character who becomes profoundly humanised in the final few pages of the original manuscript. Her name is revealed to be "Emma," and she has her previous bad behaviour explained by her own tragic backstory. As the final two pages of the original notebook detail: "Her misfortune was that having been an only daughter she had been dreadfully spoilt by a most indulgent and foolish mother who lost her husband when Emma/Mrs Lascelles was only four months old and she herself only eighteen"; and so, as Victoria notes several sentences later, Emma was allowed to grow up with all "sorts of bad and foolish habits." This is a remarkable shift in perspective: "The point of view becomes sympathetic to the stepmother who now is referred to by her first name" (Vallone 141). This shift helps to transform *Alice* from a school story concerned with the exploits of Alice and her peers into a profoundly human story of redemption for adults, as much as for the children themselves. Everybody in this world, even those who do not deserve it, can be saved.

The redemption of Emma, however, is absent from *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* (2015); instead, the editors have selected an earlier point in the original manuscript as its ending: Alice wakes with a "light heart" (56) and sets herself towards becoming a good student. This goal is reached, and as the final line in the book recounts: "in less than 3 months she was one of the best learners in the school" (56). This new ending results in the loss of later passages that tell how Alice remains at the school to witness

the arrival of other new pupils. One of the most notable of these is the Lady Christina, daughter of the Countess Somerville and recipient of awestruck admiration from the vain Charlotte: "What a lovely pink satin pelisse Lady Christina has on and what a bonnet. O how very happy Lady Christina must be to be able to have such fine things …." It is only Alice who replies, "I do not think Lady Christina is any happier for having fine clothes for did you not observe how anxious she looked when she came through the door[?]" Following the arrival of the Lady Christina, the story then shifts back to Alice's family home, Lascelles Hall. There has been another addition to the family: Alice's delicate new half-sister, Blanche. Following her daughter's birth, Mrs. Lascelles insists that the family take a tour across Italy, France, and Switzerland. The reason for this is unclear, but there are a number of potential readings, not in the least in relation to Blanche's health. Yet the trip does not come off, and even though Mrs. Lascelles behaves "like a naughty child," the consequences of her now-explained poor upbringing, it is "all to no avail." It is at this point that the composition reaches the practical limits of the red leather exercise book and ends. There is no more space to write, and the story is not continued elsewhere.

Despite what is lost, the ending provided for the published edition is a natural point of closure within the original text, and it is easy to see why it was chosen for this purpose, as it neatly wraps up one strand of the story. It compliments Victoria's authorial skills by showing that she is able to present a full, rounded narrative with both beginning and end, and that she did so at a young age. Even at her young age, she is a remarkable and talented author.

"To my dear Mamma"

VICTORIA was also attuned to the practicalities of writing and sustaining a lengthy piece of creative writing. *Alice* is not a small story; it runs to fifty pages in the notebook and fills almost every page entirely. It may also be Victoria's first public piece of composition, as evidenced by its somewhat self-conscious dedication. I reproduce it here with line-breaks intact (Fig. 6):

To my dear Mamma
this
my first attempt at
composition
is affectionately and

dutifully inscribed
by her affectionate
daughter
Victoria.

This dedication is more complex than it initially appears: *Alice* is not Victoria's first attempt at composition. An untitled story written in Ramsgate in 1827 survives in the Royal Archives, as does an initial draft and final version of *Sophie and Adolphus* (1829).

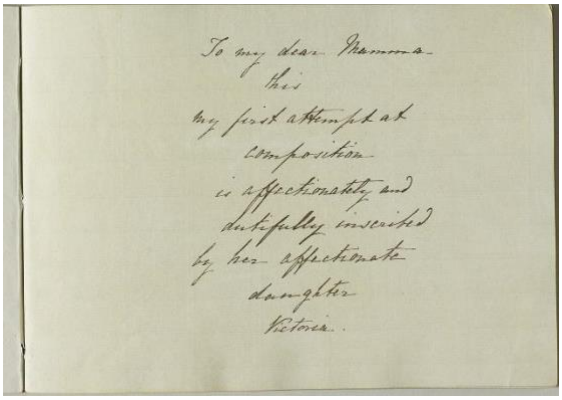


Figure 6. Dedication of Alice*, c. 1829 (Royal Archives | His Majesty King Charles III).*

These other compositions show how Victoria was able to edit and rework her writing and demonstrate her ability to sustain a lengthy piece of creative writing. They also demonstrate her fondness for dedications: although the earlier piece does not have a dedication, both the draft and longer versions of *Sophia and Adolphus* are dedicated to the "dear Baroness," namely Baroness Lehzen. The dedication to *Alice* may perhaps, then, be read more productively as a signal that this was one of the first stories Victoria wrote that she thought might be suitable for her mother to read. Vallone suggests similarly that, in *Sophia and Adolphus,* "the careful and detailed illustration that accompanies the story, as well as the inscription, point to an independent project undertaken to please" (49). However, *Sophia and Adolphus* was, as Vallone notes, "found among Victoria's things rather than her mother's" (139), and the same is true of *Alice*. This story was, then, written to please, but it was perhaps not ever read—at least, not by the Duchess of Kent.

This does not mean that no one read it. Victoria's dedication of *Alice* to her mother acknowledges her childhood surveillance and performs an appropriate sense of filial piety to the powers at the heart of it, despite the counter-performance of freedom and fellowship that lurks within the text itself. Her education had to adhere

"to every expectation of female decorum—and be recognized as doing so" (Vallone 64). In one instance, Victoria was quizzed in her knowledge by "the Bishops of London and Lincoln and the Archbishop of Canterbury" (64). This public examination had been requested by Victoria's mother in the hope of gaining approval by noted scholars and to "call attention to her fulfilment of her duty to her daughter and adopted country" (64). But then, Victoria's childhood writing was never free from such scrutiny, such concern for the presence of others. As Alexander rightfully notes, the nineteenth century was "notorious for its surveillance of the child" (2005, 27), and the young Victoria suffered more than most. She followed a series of complex educational and social rules known as the Kensington System throughout childhood. This had been developed by her mother, the Duchess of Kent, and the household comptroller, Sir John Conroy, and resulted in the former becoming an "absolute power" (Vallone 140) in Victoria's life. This highly unusual educational experiment—the training of a "faithful future female sovereign" was intended to position Victoria as the ideal monarch: dutiful, obedient, and deeply, inescapably English (Okawa 25). Not only were her days scheduled neatly to the hour but she was also rarely left by herself, even required to sleep in her mother's bedchamber. This paradoxical mixture of severity and intimacy, unusual even for aristocratic families (39), saw Victoria inhabit something of a panopticon where she was at the centre and impacted and restricted by the discursive systems positioned about her. Despite this, her writing, already a form of writing subject to becoming "public property" (Watson 56), exerts considerable effort to escape these systems whilst being simultaneously deeply conscious of their boundaries.

The critical reception about *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* (2015) recognises some of these struggles and often considers the presence of other bodies and their potential influence upon the author. Philip Hensher wonders in his review for *The Spectator* whether Victoria wrote the book herself: "It is so extraordinary and fully achieved that doubts about Victoria's sole authorship cannot be entirely stifled." Yet the editorial interventions mislead Hensher, who writes, "The main character is Alice Laselles—a misspelling of Lascelles that any German would be prone to." He then wonders, "Did her governess Baroness Lehzen have a major hand in it?" As we have seen, this misspelling is an introduced edit and not Victoria's. Hensher's review then moves somewhat against itself by concluding that *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* is most likely Victoria's own work: "The dramatic opening would have been beyond her [Lehzen], and there are bold imaginative leaps no governess would have dared make." These discussions over attribution, age, and ability are more than familiar to scholars of juvenilia. As Clémentine Beauvais rightfully notes, young authors suffer the impact of adults upon their writing in curious and persistent ways: "Like an army of prying

aunts, with a mixture of loving admiration and disbelieving curiosity, adults read over the shoulders of child writers, commenting, analysing, comparing, marvelling about their works" (62). Here Beauvais recognises both the players in this game of meaning-making, and their potentially contradictory concerns. Adults admire but also disbelieve. They compliment whilst also questioning. Although the review of Hensher checks its impulse to delve deeper into questions of authorship, the issue remains raised: is this story *actually* the work of Victoria? Which adults were involved and where are they? What did they do? Understanding these adult interventions upon the text, the adult bodies who have been involved in *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* and their diverse motivations behind such edits, becomes vital, then, for any and perhaps even all understanding of the text itself. These questions concern themselves both with the identity and skills of the young author herself and also with how and why adults intervene in the child-authored text in the first place. It is by demonstrating these interventions and their legacies that *Alice* (c. 1829) and *The Adventures of Alice Laselles* (2015) offers notable value for scholars of child-authored texts.

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NOTES

[1] Inspired by the practical moralising of *Harry and Lucy Concluded* (1835), Maria Edgeworth's conclusion to the series begun by her father Richard Lovell Edgeworth (1744–1817), *Sophia and Adolphus: In the style of Miss Edgeworth's Harry and Lucy* (1835), is a gossipy and occasionally melodramatic story of two siblings and their journey to adulthood. As with *Alice*, it is dedicated to one of the key figures of Victoria's own childhood: "My dearest Lehzen, I have taken the liberty of dedicating this book hoping to entertain." The story sees the titular siblings learn from their family's benevolence whilst also witnessing the mechanical marvels of the day and reflecting on their import. A key plot point, notable in how it explores issues of feminine agency in curtailed circumstances, sees Sophia act *in loco parentis* to a suddenly bereaved girl and teach her "to read and to wright [*sic*]; to talk french; to walk straight; to hold up her head and make neat curtesies."

[2] As Lynne Vallone's 2001 research on this story predates the publication of *The Adventures of Alice Laselles*, she refers to the original manuscript as "Alice" and retains its spelling of "Lascelles."

[3] These letters were the correspondence of the aristocratic Marquise of Sévigné, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal (1626–1696) to her daughter, Françoise-Marguerite de Sévigné (1646–1705) and others. In them, the Marquise ruminated on diverse religious and philosophical preoccupations along with recounting her own day-to-day life.

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