

Praising Girls

THE RHETORIC OF YOUNG WOMEN, 1895-1930

Henrietta Rix Wood

“Praising Girls: The Rhetoric of Young Women, 1895–1930 fills a significant gap in our understanding of the history of American women’s rhetoric. This meticulously researched study of the published writing of diverse young women documents their rhetorical performances in the school newspapers, literary magazines, and yearbooks that gave them rhetorical space. Through a feminist recovery of the genre of epideictic discourse and its uses by girls in making arguments relevant to their everyday lives, Wood offers a historical and critical tour de force.”—Nan Johnson, Ohio State University

Exploring the persuasive discourse of ordinary girls at the beginning of the twentieth century

In *Praising Girls*, Henrietta Rix Wood explores how ordinary schoolgirls engaged in extraordinary rhetorical activities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States. Focusing on high school girls’ public writing, Wood analyzes newspaper editorials and articles, creative writing projects, yearbook entries, and literary magazines, revealing how young women employed epideictic rhetoric—traditionally used to praise and blame in ceremonial situations—to define their individual and collective identities. Many girls, Wood argues, intervened rhetorically in national and international discourses on class, race, education, immigration, racism, and imperialism, confronting the gender politics that denigrated young women and often deprived them of positions of authority.

The site of the study—Kansas City, Missouri—reflects the diverse rhetorical experiences of girls in cities across the United States at the beginning of the last century. Four case studies examine the writing of privileged white girls at a college preparatory school, Native American girls at an off-reservation boarding school, African American girls at a segregated high school, and working- and middle-class girls at a large whites-only public high school. Wood’s analysis reveals a contemporary concept of epideictic rhetoric that accounts for issues of gender, race, class, and age.

PRAISING GIRLS

The Rhetoric of Young Women
1895–1930



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Henrietta Rix Wood is an assistant teaching professor in the Honors College of the University of Missouri–Kansas City. Her teaching and research focus on rhetoric, gender, history, and education. Wood is a coeditor of *In the Archives of Composition: Writing and Rhetoric in High Schools and Normal Schools* and has published essays in *American Periodicals* and *Rhetoric Review*.

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Preface**1. Girls and Rhetoric: Contexts**

Chapter one positions the persuasive discourse of young women in this study in context, reviews conceptions of epideictic rhetoric, considers new rhetorical opportunities and challenges for girls in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, surveys gender ideology, and discusses Kansas City as a location for young female rhetors.

2. Amplifying Identity: Barstow “New Girls”

Chapter two charts the collaborative efforts of affluent white girls at the first female college preparatory school in Kansas City to construct a community of scholars who prized academic, athletic, and public performance, expanding understanding of the epideictic strategy of amplification and its impact on a relatively homogeneous audience.

3. Persuading Diverse Audiences: Haskell Girls

Chapter three considers the epideictic rhetoric of Native American girls at the second largest off-reservation boarding school in the U.S. Demonstrating the purposes of epideictic rhetoric, these young women educated readers about Native Americans, preserved Indian culture, and celebrated their status as “progressive Indians” while appealing to a heterogeneous audience.

4. Glossing (over) Historical Realities: Lincoln Girls

Chapter four evaluates the epideictic tactics that girls at the first public high school for blacks used to praise young people of color during the Jim Crow era in Kansas City. Alternately obscuring and emphasizing factors that affected their lives, they complicate claims that epideictic rhetoric glosses over historical realities.

5. Creating Consubstantiality: Central Girls

Chapter five analyzes the epideictic efforts of white working-class and middle-class girls who confronted factionalism at the largest public secondary school in Kansas City. Putting Kenneth Burke’s theory of consubstantiality into practice, these young women encouraged members of their audience to recognize the ideas and ideals that united them.

Conclusion: Rhetorical Ramifications

The conclusion suggests how this book might guide new lines of inquiry into the epideictic projects of other marginalized groups of the past and present, such as immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities, and members of the LGBTQIA community, that use print to define themselves.