



Boys Will be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children's Fiction, 1857-1917

Claudia Nelson

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Feminist criticism of nineteenth-century literature has traditionally repudiated the "angel in the house"—a domestic figure who was kept in her place, isolated from the world of power and patriarchy and any influence over it except through her children. Claudia Nelson, in looking at children's fiction of 1857-1917, finds that the figure of the angel appeared as an ideal not just in literature intended for young women, but also in books for boys. Her book is an exploration of the changing ideals of masculinity disseminated in popular writing for children over a sixty-year period and of the implications of her discoveries for feminist scholarship, much of which she challenges.

Nelson argues that during the early Victorian period in children's literature, as in popular adult fiction, the idealized figure of the androgynous angelic boy recurs, enshrined as the avatar of a "manliness" that has little to do with what we today would recognize as stereotypical masculinity. Such works were saturated not only by religion but also by the religion of femininity.

In this book, we are introduced to many boys' novels that are rarely read today, and we are taught to look with new eyes at old favorites like Kipling, Stevenson, Grahame, Barrie, and Nesbit. Nelson covers such genres as the school novel, the historical tale, the adventure, and the fantasy, along the way demonstrating a tremendous breadth of reading of feminist and social history theory, as well as of children's literature. Her writing is jargon-free and her insights into the cultural importance of Victorian children's fiction highly illuminating. Among the first serious studies of this subject, it will be of interest to literary and feminist scholars of the Victorian and early modern periods.

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