

“Mistress of Effects: Performative Rhetoric and the Construction of Subjectivity in *Daddy-Long-Legs*”

Jean Webster’s rags-to-riches epistolary *Künstlerroman Daddy-Long-Legs* (1912) reads like a fairy tale. The book’s poor, orphaned protagonist, Judy Abbott, is rescued from her drab circumstances by a wealthy, white benefactor who, impressed with Judy’s writing ability, agrees to send her to college on the condition that she write him letters keeping him abreast of her progress. She does so, and the two eventually fall in love—though Judy does not realize at first that the man she has been courting, Jervis Pendleton, is actually her benefactor. Still, the story is predictable. Girl writer finds her voice, gets her guy, and quits writing: a tale as old as time.

Except that in this case, there is more to the story than its cloying and problematic plot would lead us to believe. Indeed, despite the antifeminist trajectory of the plot, wherein the girl writer is silenced and patriarchy reified, Webster’s text is actually shot through with instances of resistance and activism. In this conference paper, I will explore those instances, tracking the ways in which Webster positions Judy’s coming to voice as a liberatory act. I will argue that Webster stages Judy’s letters as a site of rhetorical tension in which she reckons with and ultimately renegotiates notions of women’s subjectivity and agency dominant at the time of her writing. Moreover, I will demonstrate that Judy’s writing itself—both in its articulations and its strategic silences—becomes a means for conducting revolutionary action.

Regarding the latter point, this paper will also examine the influence on Webster’s text of the composition scholar and (Webster’s) teacher Gertrude Buck who, in response to the social tensions created by young women’s increasing access to higher education at the turn of the century, sought to provide her students with the rhetorical tools needed for them to articulate their own identities in negotiation with dominant ideologies.