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Book Review: Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, Courting Failure: Women and the Law in Twentieth-Century Literature

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Indian slaves. There is, however, no earlier introduction of the investigator or what specifically he is investigating, although with some work I surmised that he was involved with the grand jury discussed six pages earlier, a fact which the footnote confirmed. The footnote names the investigator as “Griffin,” a name that doesn’t appear elsewhere in the chapter or in the index. These are the sorts of mistakes that a good proofread by fresh eyes other than the author’s should catch.

I finished *Manifest Destinies* convinced, as always, of the social construction of race, its slipperiness as an analytic category, its fluidity over time and geography. While she demonstrates the making of “the Mexican American *race*,” social construction also explains Gómez’s deployment of similar terms—Spanish, Spanish-Mexican, Euro-American—as something other than race. At the same time, I wonder: If Mexican American is a race, is Mexican also a race, and a distinct one at that? What about American? Few consider American a race, but more will think seriously about Mexican American as a race after reading *Manifest Destinies*.

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Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, *Courting Failure: Women and the Law in Twentieth-Century Literature*, Akron: University of Akron Press, 2007. Pp. 294. \$52.95 cloth (ISBN 978-1-931968-47-8); \$24.95 paper (ISBN 978-1-931968-48-5).

In *Courting Failure: Women and the Law in Twentieth-Century Literature*, Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, Professor and Dean of the Humanities at De Montfort University in England, surveys works of modern American, Canadian, and British literature, film, and television, as well as some cases from real life, to examine depictions of women’s encounters with a legal system that stereotypes, ignores, or silences them. In doing so, she shows how the law forces women to perform a certain kind of femininity and punishes them for not doing so, how the law often ignores the harms women suffer, and how it silences women’s voices. The trouble with the book is that none of these ideas is very original and Slettedahl does little to push them into new territory.

The first four chapters deal with four genres of literature involving women’s encounters with various aspects of the law. Chapter One examines Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus*, Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, and Sarah Waters’s gothic novel *Affinity*, all novels about women criminals, and shows that these texts challenge the inescapability of society’s disciplinary regimes, each foregrounding female characters who find ways not to conform, and to communicate thoughts and desires beyond what is acceptable to the powers that be. Chapter Two turns to “neoslave narratives,” contemporary novels in the form of the antebellum slave narrative. Slettedahl analyzes J. California Cooper’s *Family*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*, and Valerie Martin’s *Property*, discussing the ramifications for motherhood and femininity of categorizing women as possessions. Chapter Three discusses depictions of mothers in Jane Hamilton’s *Map of*

the World and Sue Miller's *The Good Mother*, as well as the real life cases of Susan Smith and Andrea Yates, and shows how motherhood is subject to social policing and monitoring in both fiction and reality. In Chapters Four and Five, Slettedahl turns to drama, specifically Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Sharon Pollack's *Blood Relations*, and Sarah Daniel's *Masterpieces*, film, namely, *I want to Live!*, *Adams' Rib*, and *Legally Blonde*, and finally the television show *Ally McBeal*, which Slettedahl claims "interrogates the position of the woman as tragic lawbreaker or comedic lawmaker" (174), and moves toward the depiction of a new, more open and constructive, relationship between women and the law.

Slettedahl limits her analytic power by a confusing organizational structure. Some chapters seem organized by theme, others by artistic medium. The first three chapters focus on women's prison narratives and the subversion of the disciplinary gaze, neoslave narratives, and depictions of society's monitoring of motherhood, respectively. The final two chapters, however, shift to a focus on medium: Chapter Four examines female characters in drama, and Chapter Five turns to film and television. This schizophrenic approach leads to confusion and repetition: for example, the first chapter, "Prison, Passion and the Female Gaze," seems to be devoted to using a feminist reading of Foucault's panopticon to analyze women's relationship to the law, but in the next chapter the book moves toward a completely new theme, women as property. This shift among theoretical frameworks gives the book a feeling of incoherence and undermines its claim to make a sustained argument.

The *Ally McBeal* section is the most original and promising in the book: it makes a convincing argument that this controversial show in fact intentionally exaggerates stereotypes of women to question notions of femininity and the meaning of gender difference. In the end, however, this book's overall structure reads more like a survey of issues in literary depictions of women and the law than sustained and focused analysis. On a textual level, it's often more a pastiche of assorted critical ideas than one coherent argument. Too often, rather than stating a theme of her own, Slettedahl resorts to pasting in, without sufficient explanation, quotes by other critics which bear little relation to each other or to any unified argument she may be trying to make. Clichés abound: the introduction is titled "Literature, Law and Desire" (1); Slettedahl tells us that "women's literature revisit[s] [issues like] regulation of desire" (1). Arguments often boil down to little more than vague truisms ("the rise of slave narratives in the late twentieth century . . . speak[s] to the ongoing engagement with racial politics in literature and law and the need to . . . offer voices to those who have been historically silent" (102); in the fiction about motherhood "women experience their relation to the law in gendered terms" (146); female lawyers have an "ethics of care" while male ones "uphold the law more forcefully" (222). Ultimately, with the exception of the section on *Ally McBeal*, while *Courting Failure* addresses an important topic, it fails to move the discussion forward in any meaningful way.

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