



The Logic of Women on Trial: Case Studies of Popular American Trials

Janice Schuetz

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Janice Schuetz investigates the felony trials of nine American women from colonial Salem to the present: Rebecca Nurse, tried for witchcraft in 1692; Mary E. Surratt, tried in 1865 for assisting John Wilkes Booth in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln; Lizzie Andrew Borden, tried in 1892 for the ax murder of her father and stepmother; Margaret Sanger, tried in 1915, 1917, and 1929 for her actions in support of birth control; Ethel Rosenberg, tried in 1951 for aiding the disclosure of secrets of the atom bomb to the Soviets; Yvonne Wanrow, tried in 1974 for killing a man who molested her neighbor's daughter; Patricia Campbell Hearst, tried in 1975 for bank robbery as a member of the Symbionese Liberation Army; Jean Harris, tried in 1982 for killing Herman Tarnower, the Diet Doctor; and Darci Kayleen Pierce, tried in 1988 for kidnapping and brutally murdering a pregnant woman, then removing the baby from the woman's womb.

In her analysis, Schuetz is careful to define these trials as popular trials. Characteristically, popular trials involve persons, issues, or crimes of social interest that attract extensive public interest and involvement. Such trials make a contribution to the ongoing historical dialogue about the meaning of justice and the legal system, while reflecting the values of the time and place in which they occur.

Schuetz examines the kinds of communication that transpired and the importance of gender in the trials by applying a different current rhetorical theory to each trial text. In every chapter, she explains her chosen interpretive theory, compares that framework with the discourse of the trial, and makes judgments about the meaning of the trial texts based on the interpretive theory.

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