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DYS/FIGURING LADY JUSTICE: PROVOCATIONS OF JUSTICE IN THE WORKS
OF THREE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: *Dys/Figuring Lady Justice: Provocations of Justice in the Works of Three Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers*

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This dissertation examines three women writers' interventions in nineteenth-century America's discourses of justice, particularly their contributions to and critiques of the prominent and yet in many ways inappropriate and repressive iconography of Lady Justice that perpetuated conceptions of justice as a static, subordinated, and impassive ideal rather than a dynamic, democratic, creative, and compassionate process. Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Harriet Ann Jacobs, and Lydia Maria Child intervened in their cultures' debates about justice by aptly and yet ironically appropriating the female figure, Justice, which often symbolized women's exclusion from official justice, to interrogate their cultures' ideas about justice. They *dys/figured* Justice, problematizing the icon (and the uncritical consumption of icons at large) while trying to figure out, literally and figuratively, how to conceive of and achieve justice. In other words, the women writers considered in this project reinterpreted, disfigured, or parodied the icon, Justice, in order to revise ideas of justice to achieve greater social equality and opportunity for women and other oppressed minorities, and provoke their communities to critically reimagine justice.

Many scholars have surveyed women writers' involvements in nineteenth-century reform efforts and politics; my study builds upon such work. I emphasize these writers' creative reconceptions of social, legal, and cultural justice and suggest altered readings of their texts by highlighting and re-contextualizing what they revealed about law, the

judicial system, and the political institutions that determined—and still determine—lives. What chiefly distinguishes my study is my exploration of these women’s interactions with the iconography of Justice; this dissertation demonstrates that these women’s discourses of justice were intensely paragonal, moving dialectically between narrative and image, and law and literature in ways that typical discipline-specific analysis obscures. Ultimately, this multidisciplinary analysis suggests that these women’s provocations urge critical reconceptions of the roles narrative and imagination must play in the processes of justice. This dissertation thus expands our understanding of nineteenth-century women’s literature and its engagement with visual culture, furthers our interdisciplinary efforts to explore the functions of ‘law and literature,’ and informs our quests to better represent and achieve justice today.