

Wood, Bethany, University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Ol' (Wo)Man River?: Broadway's Gendering of Edna Ferber's Show Boat"

Often cited as the seminal American musical, *Show Boat* has received much attention from theatre scholars. However, due to the illustrious status of the Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein musical, scholars have habitually ignored, or at the very least marginalized, the importance of Kern and Hammerstein's source material, Edna Ferber's 1926 bestselling novel. Critical discussions of *Show Boat* tend to address Ferber's work, if it is addressed at all, as a distantly related entity valuable only in its relation to the musical. Given that Kern and Hammerstein sought to keep their adaptation faithful to Ferber's novel and consulted her on the script, as evidenced by her commented draft housed at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, Ferber's absence is a particularly troublesome lacuna in theatre criticism and historiography.

Perception of the musical as a work unto itself has served to deflect scholarship from the crucial issue of gender and its deployment in the construction of the musical. The omission of gender from critical and historical discussions of *Show Boat* is particularly surprising given that Ferber originally wrote *Show Boat* for the specifically gendered audience and medium of the 1920s woman's magazine. The source material for Kern and Hammerstein's iconic American musical was thus highly gendered in its content and ideology. As *Show Boat* was adapted for the stage, this formative ideology was reformulated to suit the equally gendered medium and audience of the 1920s American theatre. This paper reintroduces Ferber's work into critical discussion of the musical thus demonstrating the central role of gender in the narrative and revealing the ideological reconstructions of gender carried out by Kern and Hammerstein in creating the musical. Examining constructions and reconstructions of gender in various permutations of Ferber's work exposes troubling trends within the historiography and criticism surrounding this cultural icon.

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