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Politics of Interfaith Marriage in Edna Ferber's *Show Boat*

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Edna Ferber's writing participates in the rhetorical tradition of the American jeremiad. From her early Emma McChesney stories to her later bestselling novels like *Giant,* Ferber followed in the footsteps laid by other Jeremiahs, who believed that America not only provided the opportunity to establish a model republic but also risked losing it because of its failure to adhere to its mission. Time and again, Ferber showcased the ways in which her countrymen were betraying the American way, highlighting the inequalities infecting our culture in order to call for reform. Like other American writers working within the rhetorical tradition of the American jeremiad, she desperately wanted America to realize her ideals, not just promise them. Thus, she used her writing to campaign for a truly equalitarian society. As her works indicate, when she saw a group being marginalized, she sought to bring it into the mainstream. It is thus no surprise that she championed the rights of women, Jews, Native Americans and Latinos.

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What did Ferber do in her best selling 1926 novel to deserve such censure? One could argue that these critics are understandably upset by her descriptions of black characters since she represents them in stereotypical ways. For example, one of the first African American figures introduced in *Show Boat,* the ship's cook, is represented as "a simple, ignorant soul" (23). Surrounding him are his helpers, "black men like himself with rolling eyes and great lips" (23). Descriptions like these are definitely troubling. However, as Robin Wood argues in a highly controversial article, "Servants and Slaves," Ferber's representations of African Americans must be placed in their proper historical context. Once we do so, Wood contends, we must realize that we cannot possibly expect her to abide by the same socially progressive standards that we use today:

> One of the main current objections to the novel... [is] that Edna Ferber, a bourgeois pink woman writing primarily for women of her class and race in the 1920s, ought to have written a book single-mindedly committed to brown militancy and political correctness in the 1990s. Of course, it would have been wonderful if she had done so. Wouldn't the fact that this was totally impossible—literally unthinkable—be taken into account? (86)

Wood also notes that Ferber's depiction of African-Americans should not be labeled "hate literature," because she renders them sympathetically. In *Show Boat,* bigots like the shallow Elly are clearly indicted for their prejudice, while blacks are described with compassion. African Americans are represented as "a wronged race" (74), not one to be despised. Although Ferber may draw on some stereotypes at times, she also subverts them. If we return to the "simple, ignorant soul," who heads the boat's kitchen, we find that he comes to life when confronted with

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the villain of the novel, the straight-laced, rigidly Puritanical Parthenia Hawks. Unlike most everyone else in the novel, he refuses to bend to her will and allow her to take over his kitchen. He fights back when she insults him, throwing a mass of wet, slimy potato peelings at her. His chutzpah is admired by "the gay little Captain Andy," Par thy's husband, one of the most sympathetic characters in the text. We are told that the look on the Captain's face when he has to bid the cook good-bye "was.. .born of an inward and badly concealed admiration" (24). The audience is thus also encouraged to admire the cook for retaliating against a woman who is described as "a nightmarish housekeeper... [who] made life wretched" for the ship's crew because "she belonged to the tribe of Knitting Women; of the Salem Witch Burners; of all the fanatics who count nature as an enemy to be suppressed; and in whose veins the wine of life runs vinegar" (24,25). Ferber's representations of African Americans are not as racist as some critics would lead us to believe. There is more to them than obvious bias.

In deciding to represent a biracial relationship in her romantic tale about a piece of Americana, Ferber traveled into extremely dangerous territory. During the period when the novel was written, miscegenation was not only a crime in many states but also grounds for outright violence against the parties involved. Sadly, we have all too familiar with the tragic fact that bi-racial couplings motivated lynching. As Werner Sollors explains, there has been a long history of intense hostility toward interracial relationships. He notes, "[even] the mere presence of a white woman and a black man in the same space could justify mob.. .terror" (*Neither* 4). In the 1920s, segregation was imposed mercilessly in the Jim Crow South, and the country as a whole was openly seeking racial purification. As historians indicate, various groups emerged during this

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decade, who devoted themselves to "whitening" America. They thus took great issue with any type of interracial relationship. In *Race: the History of an Idea in America*, Thomas Gossett explains how eugenics captured this country's imagination, giving rise to intense fears of race mixture. Scientists, zealots and ordinary Americans took it as axiomatic that any coupling between the races would lead not only to disharmony but also to the downfall of the country. Popular "science" books like Alfred E. Wiggam's *The Fruit of the Family Tree* (1924) and periodicals like *Collier's, The Saturday Evening Post and Good Housekeeping* championed eugenicist theories promoting the notion that the "Nordics" from Northern Europe were superior to non-white and less-than-white races (Nies 13). As Eva Saks explains, "the currency of eugenics... upheld the discipline and punishment of the dangerous miscegenous body in the interest of racial purity" (66). The legal community institutionalized the era's interest in racial purification. Various states upheld anti-miscegenation statutes. Just two years before *Show Boat* was published, "the most draconian miscegenation law in American history" was passed in Virginia in an attempt "to preserve racial integrity" (Pascoe 59). It included a provision that proclaimed, "It shall hereafter be unlawful for any white person in this state to marry any save a white person. For the purpose of this act the term 'white person' shall apply only to the person who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian" (qtd. in Pascoe 59). Even fictional representations of interracial relationships caused controversy. In the state of Mississippi, there was a criminal statute "that made punishable the 'publishing, printing or circulating any literature in favor of or urging interracial marriage or social equality" (*Neither* 4). Hollywood prohibited any depiction of miscegenation "irrespective of the manner in which they are treated" (qtd. in Reed 187). As Werner Sollors indicates, such edicts should come as no

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surprise as "what is subjected to socially approved or legalized bans in real life is also censored, suppressed, denied or rejected in symbolic representations" (*Neither* 4). Surely Ferber was aware of the flourishing controversy surrounding miscegenation. After all, she was in New York working on the Broadway production of *Minnick* when Eugene O'Neill was publicly censured for his dramatization of a biracial romance. As Glenda Frank reveals in "Tempest in Black and White," O'Neill was raked over the coals for daring to represent a relationship between a white woman and black man in *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924). As Frank explains, racists objected to not only the storyline but also the fact that there would be interracial casting. The Ku Klux Klan publicly threatened O'Neill's life. Newspapers fanned the flames with attacks against the play. As Frank indicates, "*Hearst's New York American* published an antagonistic report every few days" (85). Not only did the License Commissioner try to cancel the production but also New York City's mayor refused to grant permits for the cast of interracial children slated to appear in the first act. Augustus Thomas, one of the leading playwright's of the time, commented:

> In the first place, I should never have written the play, and in the second place, if I had I should be willing to do what is usually done in such cases, to permit a white man to play the part of the Negro. The present arrangement, I think, has the tendency to break down social barriers which are better left untouched, (qtd. in Frank 79)

It is clear from the reaction to O'Neill's play that the age was not ready for any type of racial integration.

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In *Show Boat*, the transgressive nature of Steve and Julie's relationship is twofold. Not only does it challenge the taboo against miscegenation, but it also confounds the cultural logic of passing. Passing becomes an issue in the miscegenation scene because Steve passes for black in order to avoid arrest. While Julie also passes, Steve's passing is especially "disruptive of the boundaries of the color line" (Williams 182), because passing typically refers to "'crossing over' the color line in the United States from black to the white side" (*Neither* 247). While one could certainly pass for black, this type of passing was not ordinarily done, especially not at the time when the novel was written, as passing is most often "an attempt to move from the cultural margins to the center" (Ginsberg 8). As Elaine Ginsberg explains, people passed to escape "the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity... [to access] the privileges and status of the other" (3). Steve claims that he is a Negro in a place (the South) during an era (the near aftermath of the Civil War) when only whiteness conferred personhood and "increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of domination." Given the asymmetry of power between the races at the time, passing for black, as Steve does, not only overturns the typical rationale for passing but in so doing, throws America's racism into relief. For his whiteness "should" have afforded him protection under the law, granted him his "inalienable" rights when, in fact, it does the opposite. His whiteness puts him at risk, placing him in a position where he could lose his liberty (be jailed for his crime). The significance of this turn of events cannot be overstated. Historically, the presumption of freedom in America arose from being white as only "whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings" (Harris 1721). Blackness meant enslavement. Being white "should" have given Steve some basic freedom, including freedom of choice, which would have allowed him to marry

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whomever he wanted. Yet it does not give him liberty at all. Thus, in very basic ways, Steve's passing not only disrupts typical racial distinctions and their underlying logic, but it also makes a mockery of America's valorization of whiteness and its legal institutionalization.

In the novel, Ferber is thus crying out against the injustices inflicted upon African Americans, exclaiming the wrongs they suffer violate America's equalitarian ideals. While the language she uses appears quite flawed by our current standards, her motivations are certainly progressive, for she wants us to feel the need to bridge the distance between the boat and the shore—between America as it is and should be—between the enforced division of black and white. Combining the politics of affect with a positive politics of miscegenation, she issues a condemnation of racial injustice as a neo-Jeremiah. By drawing on African American spirituals to remind us not only that "All of God's chil-dren got shoes" but also that "Ev'rybodytalkin' 'bout Heav'n ain'tgoin' there" (74), she forces us to recognize that "the longing of a footsore, ragged, driven race expressed in the tragically childlike terms of shoes, white robes, wings and the wise simple insight into hypocrisy" (74) exposes a heartbreaking desecration of America's most fundamental principles that must be remedied if America is to be saved as a nation. The melodramatic application of this jeremiad far from presenting a merely vulgar and oversimplified portrayal of a very real and very American condition—namely the equalitarian pursuit of happiness—establishes a moral imperative that must be practiced by the nation's citizens if they are not only to "feel right" but also "act right." Like she does in her story "The Girl Who Went Right," Ferber is dealing with issues of how things ought to be. However, in *Show Boat*, she is not merely holding up a sketch that we might observe and decode. Through her use of

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melodramatic and sentimental extension, Ferber forces her audience to emotively read themselves into the text. The novel is not extending a depiction of an individual going right. Rather, it is an experiential engine that seeks to lead a nation from out of the blackened wilderness of injustice into the idyllic promised land of an American New Canaan.

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