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Patterns of Fem-en(act)ment
in the Major Plays of
Wendy Wasserstein

by

Gail Ciociola

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

Lehigh University

2 June 1996

UMI Number: 9629352

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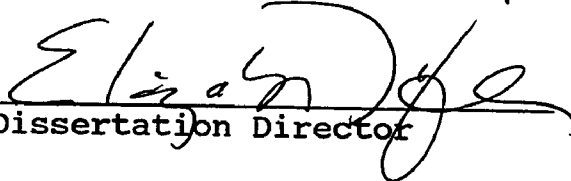
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Approved and recommended for acceptance as a
dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Apr. 30, 1996
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Acknowledgements

Several people assisted me throughout the writing of this dissertation and deserve special mention. First and foremost, I must thank Betsy Fifer who was far more to me than just a thesis director. As my mentor and comforter, she understood the complexities of juggling this project with my full and part time positions and made it possible for us to work via her home, her phone, and her mailbox.

I also wish to thank Jim Frakes and Rosemarie Arbur, who served not only on my dissertation committee but also on my examination committee, and who answered every one of my many questions throughout both experiences. I also appreciate the willingness of Pam Pepper, who, without knowing much about me, agreed to participate in my dissertation as the outside-of-department contributor.

One thing that stands out above all from doing this study is that many, many people truly adore and respect Wendy Wasserstein. Everyone I contacted during my research seemed to leap at the mention of her name and provide me with--in some cases--immediate assistance. In this vein, I thank Kim Powers of WNET in New York for lending me a cassette of the PBS presentation of Uncommon Women and Others; Erin Sanders of Second Stage for mailing me the play's revival script; Lucy LePage of Royce Carlton Agency for directing my earliest inquiries to the right places; the editors of New Women for returning my call late one night

and looking up page numbers I needed for my bibliography; and Patricia Albright of the Mount Holyoke College Archives for retrieving the mounds of Wasserstein material for me.

Of all these "strangers" who willingly assisted my efforts, however, I must especially thank Jenny Lyn Bader, Wendy Wasserstein's personal assistant. Jenny returned all my calls, mailed me notes, sent me the telescript for Antonia and Jane, and--incredibly--also sent me with the blessing and extraordinary generosity of the playwright herself the draft for An American Daughter long before it went into workshop production. Jenny Lyn also arranged that very important interview I had with Wendy and phoned me near midnight the day before to assure me that my luncheon with Wendy was really happening.

On a personal note, I thank Pat Wertman for the meals and Michael Ripchinski, a former student of mine, for being my research assistant and taskman.

On another personal note, I must also thank two people who, little known to them, began this dissertation for me some forty years ago: my mother, who wrote my first sentences with me, and my father, who told me that English was my most important subject.

Finally, I thank you, Wendy. For writing these wonderful plays and for spending well over two hours with me on a hot August Sunday in Picholine's Restaurant in New York City. You are most definitely an uncommon women.

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NOTE

Except where noted, all excerpts from Uncommon Women and Others, Isn't It Romantic, and The Heidi Chronicles appear in The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1990.

All excerpts from The Sisters Rosensweig appear in The Sisters Rosensweig published by Harcourt Brace in 1993.

Abstract

Patterns of Fem-en(act)ment in the Major Plays of Wendy Wasserstein

In order to establish Wendy Wasserstein as a major figure in American drama, I have examined her plays in light of a new critical context called fem-en(act)ment: textual or performance drama that, guided by a feminist disposition, thematically and stylistically enacts situations of interest to women, the psychological and social effects of which form the core of that drama.

Though Wasserstein has written numerous essays and minor plays, her four major works individually and collectively form a feminist oeuvre. Shaped by liberal, cultural, and materialist feminist theory, Wasserstein's plays illustrate the impact of the women's movement on private life and evince a near-sequel effect as they observe this impact through her characters' college years (Uncommon Women and Others), mid-twenties (Isn't It Romantic), mid-thirties (The Heidi Chronicles), and middle age (The Sisters Rosensweig).

Although each play respectively highlights a particular theme--choices, mother-daughter relationships, sisterhood, and the relationship between men and women--each frequently contains, as well, some reconsideration of the issues found in her others. This tendency to recycle ideas

typifies what Joanna Russ calls the lyric mode of female writing, and together with her autobiographical references and episodic, non-linear structure, Wasserstein consequently develops her feminist themes with artistic devices associated with feminist style.

Wasserstein primarily concludes that for the college-educated uncommon woman, choices regarding career and family remain problematic and result in an "either/or" dilemma or in a near-impossible attempt to have it all by juggling the demands of personal and professional life. As her characters negotiate their choices, Wasserstein also concludes that the prospects for sustained loving relationships with men and the reliability of support structures among women themselves remain problematic as well.

Although she dares to observe the conflicts arising in a woman's life as a result of feminism's impact, the overall scope of Wasserstein's work remains committed to the women's movement. A personal and political writer, Wasserstein demonstrates as an artist and social commentator not only that she deserved to win her 1989 Pulitzer Prize for The Heidi Chronicles but also that she deserves recognition as a major contemporary American playwright.

Chapter 1

Wendy Wasserstein: Feminism, Feminist Drama, and Fem-en(act)ment

Fem-en(act)ment: Toward a Definition

Although Wendy Wasserstein originally envisioned The Heidi Chronicles as a "history of the Women's Movement" (Betsko 431), her Pulitzer Prize-winning play recounts the personal chronicle of one woman, as the title suggests, more than it tells the political one of all women. Depicting the impact of the late twentieth century women's movement on the fictitious Heidi Holland, Wasserstein examines how Heidi struggles between her college years and midlife with what T. E. Kalem describes in Uncommon Women and Others as "the expanding, unnerving world of women's goals and options" (111). In light of Wasserstein's previous and subsequent major plays, however, it seems clear that the impact of the feminist movement on those whom she names "uncommon women and others" has generated a stylistic and thematic impulse not only in The Heidi Chronicles but in these other dramas as well. In this study, therefore, I intend to examine Wendy Wasserstein's major plays as an oeuvre devoted to socio-political and literary objectives that I will call "fem-en(act)ment" and to establish that Wasserstein utilizes fem-en(act)ment primarily as a cyclic rendering of the impact of the women's movement on private life.

"Fem-en(act)ment" as word and concept provides a functional means by which Wasserstein's plays can be best understood as philosophy and as literary genre and style. It reflects what Mary Daly calls gynomorphic language, a re-working of linguistic systems to create new words and produce meanings vital to women's ends (Gyn/Ecology xi). Constructed as such, its fragmented components yield the principal contexts: "fem," for female perspective and feminist intent; "(act)," for stage drama; and "en(act)ment," for the revelation and successful execution of one's overall motifs and motives. As a whole, then, fem-en(act)ment is textual or performance drama that, guided by a feminist disposition, thematically and stylistically enacts situations of interest to women, the psychological and social effects of which form the core of that drama.

It is important to note that in itself fem-en(act)ment does not advance a specific feminist agenda. The current climate of feminist debate, however, makes it difficult to acknowledge whether one's position is indeed feminist or not and by extension whether a playwright's work is indeed feminist or not. For this reason, I would like to clarify my vision of feminism and feminist drama and, most importantly, to locate Wasserstein's position in both.

Wasserstein's Feminism: An Overview

Although she refers to herself as a humanist, Wasserstein wields a good bit of political rhetoric, often under the cloak of humor, by framing her approaches from a viewpoint that she herself could not imagine to be anything but feminist. In a series of articles for Harper's Bazaar called "The Wendy Chronicles," for instance, she has comically attacked the lack of female character actors in Hollywood, lamented "lesbian chic" as a fashion statement divorced of any real human-rights stance, and downplayed the significance of the electoral Year of the Woman (1992) by noting that "365 days was all we were given" ("Backlash Blues" 77). As these examples indicate, Wasserstein not only calls attention to certain ethical situations significant to women but also advocates a position that she, as well as a public prone to generalizations, would define as feminist.

Contrary to public perception, however, there is no such thing as feminism. It exists, instead, as a categorization of study and practice just as diverse in scope, for instance, as psychology. As Lynda Hart notes, "feminism has become feminisms" (Hart and Phelan 7), a myriad of different and sometimes conflicting ideas about how women define themselves and their needs. Theoretical texts designed to label the sources and dimensions of

various first- and second-wave movements, for instance, identify specific feminist approaches such as liberal, cultural, materialist, psychoanalytic, radical, and existential. Many third-wave feminists of the 1990s, on the other hand, appear to eschew these labels in favor of what Jill Dolan dismisses as "playful pluralism" (Spectator 3) or to distance themselves from them altogether. For this reason, a public or media declaration that Wasserstein's positions reflect feminist thinking--even though that estimation appears not only obvious but accurate--requires a different kind of exploration in the context of scholarly considerations.

While Dinah Leavitt maintains that the "specific way in which each . . . performer defines 'feminist' is very important to an understanding of that . . . individual's work" (9), Wasserstein seems to favor a pluralistic blend of feminism. She reveals signs of liberal, cultural, and materialist thinking, and as a whole seems to advance contemporary "power feminism" (Wolf 137). Of the first three types, Wasserstein's major plays predominantly espouse the liberal feminist ethic of equality between the sexes and, in particular, of achieving parity with men in the workplace and at home. In The Heidi Chronicles, for instance, this conviction underscores Heidi Holland's observation to Scoop Rosenbaum that all women deserve to

"fulfill their potential" rather than spend a lifetime of "making you and your children tuna-fish sandwiches" (173).

According to critics of liberal feminism, it relies on a value system claimed to be universal. On one hand, consequently, it ignores differences among women and assumes that they all strive for the same things, for instance, as Heidi Holland, an art historian with a Ph.D. Although the critics have a valid point that liberal feminism does not adequately recognize racial, class, and value differences among women, Wasserstein does not pretend to speak for all women. As Chapter 2 will demonstrate in more detail, her main characters are not Everywoman, but college-educated and career-driven "uncommon women" determined to "fulfill their potential" even when they have not reached certainty about the direction of that potential. More important to Wasserstein's liberal feminism than quibbling about the notion that all women do not subscribe to the same values is that they probably do subscribe to achieving *whatever* they choose without fear of sexual discrimination or, perhaps, of pitting their job affairs against their private ones.

A second objection is that "the universally human" to which liberal feminists write is "still based on the male model" (Dolan, Spectator 3, 5), making some critics uneasy about calling the liberal faction feminist at all. While some of the values embraced by Wasserstein's "uncommon

women," especially regarding their quest for power and parity in the marketplace, have evolved largely from male experience and standards, my problem with the critics lies in the essentialist tone that does not acknowledge that some of those values, regardless of their origin, might be worth valorizing even if others, like enforced gender roles, are not. The "universally human" to which the critics refer is, in fact, more familiarly known as Wasserstein's self-described platform of humanism, and although Toril Moi for one has voiced objections specifically to "humanism" (87), there is, it seems, room here as well as in feminism for the "playful pluralism" to which Jill Dolan objects. It allows Wasserstein, for example, to abandon traditional models of femininity and gender roles, which humanism may or may not advance, and suggests that her humanism probably evolves from the underlying belief in an individual's dignity.

Wasserstein's predilection toward cultural feminism, or "'difference feminism'" (Young, "Perspective" M3), aligns less with its theoretical reification of sexual difference and female superiority than it does with the creative processes of form and style in which she writes her plays both individually and as an oeuvre. This will be examined more closely in the context of feminist drama, but I should note that in literary practice, cultural feminism is frequently associated with the mother-daughter paradigm.

Wasserstein's most obvious treatment of this appears in Isn't It Romantic; however, it also materializes to some extent in The Sisters Rosensweig and to a lesser degree in The Heidi Chronicles.

As they do with liberal feminism, critics allege among other things that while cultural feminists favor so-called female values over those purportedly endorsed by men, they ignore the differences among women, as though there exists a "mythic subject Woman" replete with a feminized version of "transcendent, universal" identity (Dolan, Spectator 10, 9). According to Jill Dolan, the emphasis on the mother-daughter motif, in particular, reflects a failure to deconstruct "family-structured gender policies" (Spectator 9), which not only alienate those women uncomfortable with the traditional family formula but also involve a dangerously close alliance with biological determinism.

Wasserstein has characterized Isn't It Romantic as a play about "single women and their mothers" (Bachelor Girls 30). I don't disagree with this estimation, but I think "a play about single women and their mothers and the way they all made their life choices" would more accurately reflect its content. In other words, as Chapter 3 will discuss, while situations in the play whirl about two daughters and their mothers, the relationships themselves do not form the thematic core of the play. Nonetheless, even if they did,

it would seem ridiculous to accuse Wasserstein of automatically promulgating some family agenda, which in itself also does not necessarily constitute an anti-feminist position.

More enlightening about Wasserstein's mother-daughter motif, perhaps, is what the oeuvre's situations and themes reveal with regard to it. Contrary to traditional family structure, for one thing, the never-married Heidi Holland in The Heidi Chronicles adopts a child alone, and in The Sisters Rosensweig, Tess Goode lives on-and-off with her twice-divorced, currently unmarried mother, Sara. But let's establish the crucial point: Wasserstein's governing emphasis in these plays, as well as in Uncommon Women and Others and, in my opinion, Isn't It Romantic, lies not with mothers and daughters but with the independent nature of these "uncommon women" and the forces behind all their life choices. Despite the critics' reservations, understandable in light of dominant cultural ideology, mothers and daughters occupy a large space in the collective psyche, and Wasserstein's inclusions, subtle or otherwise, operate mainly as subtext not pretext.

Ultimately, as suggested, life choices dominate the scope of Wasserstein's drama. Believing that all women "deserve to fulfill their potential," Wasserstein consistently intertwines this idea with the elusive prospect

of "having it all" or of having that successful balance of career and family that Betty Friedan termed the "feminist mystique" (Second Stage 27). As her plays painfully reveal and as subsequent chapters will demonstrate, neither Wasserstein nor her characters fully resolve the dilemmas posited by the feminist mystique, since both are apparently resigned to an "either/or" fissure of family vs. career.

Wasserstein's scrutiny of this process and of the pressures and misgivings associated with it constitutes, in a limited sense, a materialist feminist approach. Materialist feminism, the currently preferred term to its predecessors, Marxist feminism and socialist feminism, is informed by the latter's most important common variable, the examination of the material conditions of women's lives. To some, all feminist movements allegedly do this, but in theory and literary criticism materialist feminism more pointedly attempts to "disrupt the narrative gender ideology, to denaturalize gender as representation, and to demystify the workings of the genderized representational apparatus itself" (Dolan, Spectator 101). For example, then, it points out that since power is "not inherently male, a woman who assumes a dominant role is only malelike if the culture considers power as a solely male attribute" (Dolan, Spectator 68).

The material condition on which Wasserstein focuses most consistently is that "uncommon women" do struggle with the previously noted "either/or" predicament as they determine their life choices. Unlike a staunch materialist, however, she doesn't quite challenge the dominant cultural ideology that men can have both a career and family without the same inner turmoil that women experience in first seeking and then balancing the two. Instead of challenging the ideology, she shows her characters' attempts--however unsuccessfully--to adjust their lives around it. In the process, she doggedly maintains the same perspective throughout the oeuvre, for even though she sometimes takes on the persona of a mere observer of feminist angst, she persistently maintains her belief that a woman is entitled to pursue both her professional goals and private desires without sacrificing one for the other and in particular without sacrificing the former for the latter.

Because this position manifests itself regardless of what form of second-wave feminism she evinces, Wasserstein essentially identifies with contemporary power feminism. Technically, this is little more than neo-liberal feminism, especially since it promotes ideas of equality and self-empowerment but without the benefit of a clear theoretical impulse. Unfortunately, however, power feminism has also been unfairly parlayed into a binary opponent of what the

media and some feminists have characterized as "victim feminism," dubiously defined by Naomi Wolf as "seek[ing] power through an identity of powerlessness" (135).

Though Wasserstein would certainly disavow victim feminism by Wolf's standard, she has acknowledged frequently that sexual discrimination has led to the underrepresentation of women in all aspects of theatre production, a condition that to "victim feminists" indicates what battlegrounds they should address. Consequently, as further exploration will confirm, Wasserstein's locus in this heavily publicized debate--at times, an almost nasty one--is actually compatible with the underlying premises of each side.

Proponents of power feminism include, most notably, Wolf, Christina Hoff Sommers, Rene Denfeld, and Katie Roiphe, although even they do not always agree with one another. Denfeld probably speaks for all, however, when she complains that the "empowering vision has been turned on its head in feminism today" by "ideological extremism," such as anti-pornographer Catherine MacKinnon's, which has "cast[] women as helpless babes" in a way that "dismisses our strength." In addition, says Denfeld, the "perception that being a feminist means hating men is a major reason why so many women who support equality don't want anything to do with the [women's] movement" ("Feminist Movement" A27).

Sommers, in particular, has attacked what she calls "gender feminists" who fuel this so-called war between the sexes. In Who Stole Feminism? How Women Have Betrayed Women, she suggests that "gender feminists" ignore the significant gains achieved by women and cites Susan Faludi's Backlash as an example, she says, of faulty research aimed at uncovering and condemning ongoing patriarchal compliance in female subjugation and victimization.

In "'I'm Not a Feminist But I Play one on TV,'" Faludi dismisses this contingent as "Pod Feminists" (32) whose "co-opted language of 'empowerment' and 'reconciliation'" with men (33) reduces them to "feminist denouncers" (34) who audaciously call themselves feminists to a media giddy to play "gotcha journalism" (38). Saying that outrage and vocalization against harassment, coercion, and pornography are in themselves exemplary of action and antithetical to victim politics, Faludi notes that "[f]eminism identifies victimization not so we can wallow in it, but so we can wallop it" (36).

"Anti-feminist feminists," claims Leora Tanenbaum, are a conservative element who "do acknowledge, to a small extent, the dangers of sexism and the power of sexist institutions, but they advocate individualistic coping mechanisms" (12). Both she and Faludi argue, in fact, that in the name of rugged individualism and self-empowerment,

the "anti-feminist feminists" betray a naive assessment of gender politics and have avoided the difficult arena of protest and serious political action needed for the guarantee of women's rights.

As stated already, Wasserstein evinces a particularly instructive position in this fray. For example, despite the materialist feminist investigation into the cultural constraints of power, Wasserstein herself never considers it the exclusive property of masculine behavior. Reflecting the central premise of power feminism, in fact, she circulates a rather extraordinary base of power in and about the business careers of Lillian Cornwall (Isn't It Romantic) and Sara Goode (The Sisters Rosensweig) and throughout the academic world of Heidi Holland. If anything, Wasserstein assumes that the desire to define and achieve self-empowerment motivates all of her "uncommon women," and consequently she not only rejects any tendency to resigned victimization--or to hating men, for that matter--but also eschews the kind of "ideological extremism" to which Denfeld also objects.

On the other hand, Wasserstein recognizes, like Faludi and Tanenbaum, that sexual discrimination still exists and that power feminism, for this reason, still necessitates some activism and protective legislation. In The Heidi Chronicles, for instance, her main character displays an unmistakable sense of self-empowered awareness and

initiative from the onset of the play by single-mindedly pursuing a career as an art historian. However, once Heidi becomes a committed feminist, she also becomes politically involved by marching in protest against the lack of museum retrospectives for women artists.

Furthermore, as noted earlier, Wasserstein herself manifests the kinds of activity that Faludi deems essential to women's rights by speaking out in her lectures and essays on behalf of numerous feminist positions. Her contribution to "Our Bodies No More," which appreciatively mentions both Marilyn French and the much-maligned Faludi, provides a particularly significant example of activism by implying the need for de jure protection of women's "'control over their own bodies'" (229).

By synthesizing the oppositions of this current and inflammatory state of feminist dialogue, Wasserstein by extension also expands herself further into the pluralistic mode she favors. As this synthesis and the entire overview demonstrate, then, a scholarly analysis of her location in theoretical and practical feminism confirms what a perhaps less-informed observer might already conclude: that in light of the diverse strains of liberal, cultural, and materialist feminism in her work, as well as a penchant for contemporary power feminism, Wendy Wasserstein cultivates a feminist disposition convincingly.

Wasserstein and Feminist Drama: An Overview

Although a feminist impulse pervades and sustains each play in Wasserstein's oeuvre, this impulse does not in itself, however, automatically create "feminist drama." As a specific genre, "feminist drama" encompasses matters regarding style and message that require further discussion and clarification.

According to Gayle Austin, "not all plays by or about women need be stimulated by feminist theory" (Feminist Theories 93). Although a pluralistic mix does--consciously or unconsciously--inform Wasserstein's material, she began writing Uncommon Women and Others in 1973 at the Yale School of Drama mainly because the representation of women in her assigned readings of Jacobean drama appalled her. Men "'were kissing the skulls of women and dropping dead from the poison,'" she says. "'And I thought, this is not familiar to me'" (Finn 360). Interestingly, because the play examines female life, a male student dismissed it as meaningless to him, thereby angering Wasserstein. "'I thought, I spent my life getting into Hamlet and Lawrence of Arabia, so why don't you try it'" (Finn 360).

Wasserstein's experience in this situation exemplifies her confrontation with what feminist film critic Laura Mulvey identifies as the "male gaze," a voyeuristic and narcissistic phenomenon in which cinema--and, by

association, drama--represents women as erotic objects for male pleasure and depicts the hero as a figure with whom the male spectator identifies (16-19). As Wasserstein said years after the Yale incident, when women attend the theatre, there "should be something for them" (Cohen 261).

Identifying what that "something" means and how it materializes in film, stage, or script as a feminist undertaking, however, comprises the ongoing debate among feminist performance critics. As Dinah Leavitt observes, little agreement exists about the nature of feminist drama except that it focuses on women's experiences (12). In fact, one of the reasons that I have coined the expression "fem-en(act)ment" to suit my own purposes is that research regarding women as authors and subjects of drama reveals a somewhat confusing array of terminology, such as "feminist drama," "feminist theatre," and "woman-conscious" drama, each of which applies only somewhat satisfactorily to Wasserstein.

Rosemary Curb, for instance, prefers the phrase "woman-conscious" drama, which she defines as "all drama by and about women that is characterized by multiple interior reflections of women's lives and perceptions" (302). Since Wasserstein frequently evinces the mode of "multiple interior reflections," most notably in Uncommon Women and Others and The Heidi Chronicles, she does conform to Curb's

criteria. Circumscribed as such, "woman-conscious" drama seems laudably democratic, but it dangerously--though inadvertently, perhaps--leaves room for plays that could defend female subservience, domestic or otherwise, as bliss, a troubling proposition antithetical to Wasserstein's feminism.

According to the criteria by which critics understand the term, Wasserstein also does not write "feminist theatre." Functioning specifically as "rhetorical enterprises [whose] primary aim is action, not art" (Patti Gillespie 286), feminist theatre, best exemplified in the collaborative approaches of feminist theatre groups such as the Split Britches company of New York and the Rhode Island Feminist Theatre, exists primarily as a persuasive tool meant to bolster or influence feminist beliefs and political activity. These "inherently radical" productions, according to Elizabeth Natalie, frequently disrupt conventional representational apparatus and dominant gender ideology, such as compulsory heterosexuality, and "do not operate within the boundaries of commercial theatre." Citing Wasserstein specifically, Natalie notes that the author of The Heidi Chronicles belongs, unlike feminist theatre writers, to an "independent set of women playwrights (often with a feminist vision) who write for more mainstream audiences" (115).

Wasserstein does, however, write feminist *drama*. "If the agent is a woman, her purpose autonomy, and the scene an unjust socio-sexual hierarchy," says Janet Brown, "the play is a feminist drama" (16). Fulfilling Brown's description--which, in short, tailors character, theme, and plot to feminist intent--Wasserstein's major characters are women at odds with existing socio-sexual traditions that make their desire to achieve autonomy and balance private desires with professional ones problematic. What separates this from "woman-conscious" drama is the emphasis on "autonomy"; what separates it from feminist theatre, especially in Wasserstein's case, hinges on objective. Merging feminist "ethics with its aesthetics" (Leavitt 94), she values the artistry of her work in a way that feminist theatre writers do not, and although her plays operate at times as consciousness-raising, she acts mainly as a chronicler and observer of her characters' situations, not as a propagandist who utilizes characters to forward an agenda.

The problem for me with Brown's definition lies in the absence of any remark pertaining to style. In itself, this may seem unimportant, but my vision of fem-en(act)ment includes a crucial reference to style because, as I will demonstrate shortly, it figures so predominantly in the development of Wasserstein's principal themes.

Dramatic style involves the playwright in both literary approaches and production values. Jill Dolan, for whom both these enterprises make feminist drama in general and "woman-conscious" drama in particular a matter of materialist investigation, has written extensively, for example, about what she perceives as the need for experimental techniques that undercut "the complicity of the representational apparatus in maintaining sexual difference" (Spectator 101).

Since fem-en(act)ment includes textual or performance drama, the definition's reference to style can address methodology for either medium. Regardless of which approach one chooses to examine, however, drama as an object of study presents problems not associated with other literary genres. As Gayle Austin writes, its intrusive stage directions and speaker cues make it "more difficult than fiction or poetry to read on the page," and live performances of it are "temporal, yet, unlike films and video, not convenient to study in detail" (Feminist Theories 2). In Wasserstein's case, the performance dilemma is resolved in two instances by video versions of The Heidi Chronicles, originally telecast by TNT in October 1995, and of Uncommon Women and Others, presented with most of its original cast members in May 1978, by the PBS Great Performances series.

Although I have seen these presentations and have also attended live performances of all of Wasserstein's major

plays except Isn't It Romantic, Wasserstein's commitment to and development of her themes convince me that a study of textual drama, rather than performance drama, provides the more appropriate forum for intensive scrutiny. As Austin observes, "the written text . . . remains after performance is forgotten. It is what 'becomes' of the play, what the play 'means' to succeeding generations" (Feminist Theories 3).

The literary style that informs Wasserstein's textual drama and contributes to her thematic development and redevelopment reflects what feminist studies identify as a female, if not feminist, mode of writing.

Wasserstein's Literary Style

As Audre Lorde once observed, the "master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (110). This pithy and insightful statement applies not only to racial and feminist issues in general, as Lorde intended it to, but also to the place of women in a literary canon that still relegates women's writing to token representation. In other words, as Sue-Ellen Case wrote in 1988, women writers and critics should "abandon traditional patriarchal values embedded in prior notions of form, practice and audience response in order to construct new critical models and methodologies for the drama that would accommodate the presence of women in

the art, support their liberation from cultural fictions of the female gender and deconstruct the valorisation of the male gender" (Feminism and Theater 114-15). Although critics could argue that Wasserstein has not completely abandoned traditional form in the construction of her dramas, she unmistakably invests her work with certain literary practices that critics recognize as common mainly to women writers.

Speaking specifically about plays by feminist theatre groups, Elizabeth Natalie notes that these works contain "non-linear . . . techniques to convey the emotional and psychological development of the characters." Consequently, their plays tend to gravitate toward an episodic structure sprinkled with intimate monologues that, along with character interaction, emphasize the "emotional quality of the play" more than the storyline (61). As already indicated, Wasserstein does not write feminist theatre, but she does manifest an affinity for the techniques that Natalie identifies with it.

To illustrate this, The Sisters Rosensweig is the only one of Wasserstein's major plays that does not consist of an episodic format. Uncommon Women and Others, for instance, contains 16 scenes divided into two acts. The first and last take place at a 1978 reunion; the remainder recount in loosely connected chronology the women's senior year at

college; and--in a rather conspicuously non-linear pattern-- an off-stage announcer introduces 13 of these segments with historical or observational material. Similarly, Isn't It Romantic includes a prologue and 13 vaguely arranged scenes with seven prefatory "telephone machine" voiceovers, and The Heidi Chronicles comprises 11 thematically related segments spread over approximately 25 years with a prologue set in a 1989 lecture hall at the beginning of each act.

Very little actually "happens" during these episodes. However, as subsequent chapters will demonstrate, Wasserstein's characters do undergo a psychological and emotional kinesis generated by inner conflicts that stem directly from the changing climate associated with the women's movement. In actuality, this describes the "drama" of Wasserstein's work, and it typically evolves less through event or action than through dialogue and the "multiple interior reflections" that Rosemary Curb observes in "woman-conscious" drama (302). Consequently, while Holly Kaplan (Uncommon Women and Others), Janie Blumberg (Isn't It Romantic), and Heidi Holland may or may not convince us that their actions amount to much, their painful soliloquies leave no doubt that the inner turmoil hurts.

Like Jill Dolan, I prefer to attach this non-linear, episodic process, along with its affective tendencies, to cultural feminism, especially since Natalie's association of

its methodology with feminist theatre precludes Wasserstein. Dolan characterizes this approach as a "documentary style," circular and frequently devoid of narrative closure, periodically fueled with consciousness-raising, and almost universally based on a variety of women's experiences (Spectator 85).

With regard to the last criterion, Natalie (114), Leavitt (17), and other feminist drama critics invariably agree that the situations, reflections, and resolutions found in women's plays emanate mainly from the writer's own life. This is certainly true in Wasserstein's case, at least to some extent. While admitting that she merely assumes a persona in her essays, she muses cryptically that in drama, however, "you can divide yourself into a lot of characters and hide . . . in different places" (Cohen 263).

She refers specifically to Isn't It Romantic as her "most autobiographical play" (Free Library 1995), and the lives of her three sisters Rosensweig at times bear uncanny resemblance to those of Wasserstein and her two older siblings, Sandra Meyer and Georgette Levis. In Uncommon Women and Others, set at Wasserstein's alma mater of Mount Holyoke during roughly the same time she attended the institution, Holly Kaplan also evokes a number of similarities with Wasserstein herself.

As the ensuing pages will explore, though, these plays also seem to evince the kind of psychological experiences that Natalie and Leavitt probably have in mind when they refer to the private sources upon which women's plays are built. The Heidi Chronicles, in particular, suggests Cathleen McGuigan, was created by Wasserstein at a "sad and disconnected" period of her life (77). Says Wasserstein, "I wrote this play because I had this image of a woman standing up at a women's meeting saying "I've never been so unhappy in my life"" (Shapiro 90). "It was that whole idea of the We Generation, and then everyone was going off in their own direction" (McGuigan 77).

As Robin Morgan is quick to point out, the experiences contained in the work of women writers "are not . . . private hang-ups. They are shared by every woman" (xx). While Morgan's second comment seems essentialist, Wasserstein's evocation of a dissolved communal consciousness probably matches the sentiments of a number of committed feminists from the 1980s. The most significant aspect of such private or autobiographical ruminations, however, is that in Wasserstein's case they operate in *all* of her plays as a distinctive twist of style, specifically by fleshing her character development more intentionally and then underscoring the psycho-emotional nature of the characters' monologues and dialogues.

Wasserstein defuses the intensity of this undertaking, though, by incorporating liberal doses of humor into all of her plays. In a large sense, this, too, reflects an autobiographical disposition. "I think [humor's] sort of how I get by," she says. It "makes [me] entertaining [to other people], too it deflects, and also it's a way of commenting on things. So . . . it's very important to me" (Cohen 265). Given Wasserstein's propensity for gleaning her own life for material and given the importance attached to this as a stylistic enterprise, she unsurprisingly, then, claims to create her plays principally "in terms of the rhythm of theatrical comedy" (Cohen 259).

According to Howard Stein, however, Wasserstein's humorous design resonates with an aura of "dark comedy and black humor," which, although it "reflect[s] and illuminate[s] the tragic condition" of her characters, also camouflages their misery (25). Wasserstein does not deny this. A "lot of comedy is deflection," she says. "If you look at Isn't It Romantic, Janie Blumberg is always funny, so as not to say what she feels" (Cohen 259).

Most crucial to her use of humor, however, is that Wasserstein effects an underlying feminist control of it. According to Lisa Merrill, the "point-of-view represented in feminist comedy . . . affirms women's experience, rather than denigrating it" (275). Blumberg, in particular,

exemplifies Merrill's drift. Janie's self-deprecating humor pervades Isn't It Romantic, but, instead of undermining her, it always illuminates her self-worth. "I could marry the pervert who's staring at us," she says to Harriet Cornwall in Act One. Instead of turning this into a desperate joke about her marriage prospects, however, Janie adds quickly, "No. That's not the solution" (82), and by the play's end, she chooses not to marry her eventual fiance, Marty Sterling, rather than abandon her career aspirations. In a single stroke, Wasserstein evinces a feminist twist on the "old maid" joke and concludes with feminist convictions intact.

Of all the strategic characteristics identified with feminist literary production, however, the nature and use in particular of what critics term a "circular" writing style not only emerge most frequently in discussion but are also very closely connected with the episodic, non-linear composition cited earlier. In short, it extends the concepts of the latter to include a repeated emphasis of an author's themes without regard to conventional dramatic development. Based to some degree on Helene Cixous' notion of "l'écriture feminine," a cyclic tactic theoretically gives rise to a "distinctively feminine morphology" (Case, Feminism and Theater 34) that approximates writing with the body. As Sue-Ellen Case explains, a "female form might

embody her sexual mode, aligned with multiple orgasms, with no dramatic focus on ejaculation or necessity to build to a single climax" (Feminism and Theater 129). Translated into the mode of textual drama, a circular form reiterates the same experiences and ideas, sometimes with a heightened sense of emotional investment for its characters, but rarely with one traditionally tailored climax. Although wary of its biological component, Dolan notes that writing "with the female body allows for . . . [a] florid, stream-of-consciousness style that inscribes sexual difference as the content and form of cultural feminist theatre" (Spectator 8).

Of all her alliances with so-called female textuality, the most compelling influence in Wasserstein's oeuvre lies with this cyclic treatment of the issues most important to her. Themes and recurring motifs appear and re-surface for sometimes similar, sometimes different, sometimes closer scrutiny. Mirroring Joanna Russ' concept of the "lyric mode" ("Heroine" 12), Wasserstein literally views and re-views the private impact of the women's movement, first on her "uncommon women and others" and then more microscopically on Janie Blumberg, Heidi Holland, and the Rosensweigs. Consequently, more than any other device found in her work, her cyclic enterprise not only creates a feminine structural design but also facilitates the central

thesis of my study that Wasserstein unifies the four plays into a cohesive exploration of the feminist condition in women's lives.

As this discussion makes obvious, then, Wasserstein demonstrates a number of devices associated with female and feminist writing. She invests her material with autobiographical nuances, exercises feminist control over her humor, and largely fashions the cyclic treatment of her psycho-social themes through non-linear, episodic strategies. With her emphasis on these stylistic measures and with her divergence from the existing terminology connected with women's contributions to drama, Wendy Wasserstein distinctly complies with the aesthetic conditions that fem-en(act)ment inscribes.

Purpose and Structure of the Study

Having established Wasserstein's feminist disposition and her place in feminist drama and textuality and having positioned those into my own framework of fem-en(act)ment, I am prepared now to detail much more specifically how Wasserstein utilizes fem-en(act)ment not only in each of her plays but also in their collective relationship to one another as an oeuvre.

As I stated in my opening paragraph and elsewhere, Wasserstein applies her feminist and literary objectives

primarily to the cyclic rendering of the effect of the women's movement on human life. Technically, she approximates the original premise for The Heidi Chronicles by re-enacting the contemporary "history of the Women's Movement" in *all* her plays, but by providing mere glimpses into its political manifestations, she succeeds only in highlighting a few select milestones. Consequently, in practice, Wasserstein enacts a personal history of that movement far more successfully than a political one.

The real history in Wasserstein's plays, then, is the private impact of the changing socio-political climate that the women's movement generates in individual women like the fictitious characters of her dramas. I intend to explore in the following five chapters the specific nature of that impact and, in particular, its recurring patterns: characters' reviewing newfound options and choices made available through the women's movement; their confronting its communal repercussions between mothers and daughters, between women and men, and between women and women; their dealing with the uncertainty of their "either/or" resolutions in a world in which "it's just not possible to have it all" (Brustein, "Extremis" 34); and the distinctive variations of these patterns at the different stages of female life passage that each play examines.

In summary, Chapter 2, "Wasserstein's Uncommon Women," consists of two parts and initially identifies the type of character about whom Wasserstein writes in her oeuvre and that Uncommon Women and Others introduces. Entitled "'Heart and Mind Together,'" this first section develops a composite description of "uncommon women" by exploring characteristics that Wasserstein's protagonists share. The second part, "Fulfilling Potential: Where Am I Going?" is devoted to Uncommon Women and Others and details the early impact of the women's movement on a group of college students as they "challenge social roles" generally prescribed by traditional values (Susan Carlson 572) and review their personal and professional options for the future, a motif that resurfaces at other life stages in every subsequent play.

"Having It All: A Woman Is [Not] Her Mother" shows that Wasserstein's second major play, Isn't It Romantic, acts as a quasi-sequel to Uncommon Women and Others with its re-view of that play's issues and with its more microscopic examination of two other "uncommon women" who have now graduated from college. Because of Wasserstein's interest in the mother-daughter relationship in Isn't It Romantic, however, Chapter 3 posits their conflicting options against choices made or prescribed by their mothers.

"'All in This Together': Idealism, Sisterhood, and Other Dilemmas" predominantly probes The Heidi Chronicles' exploration into sisterhood and feminist solidarity in the female community and, in particular, into its emotional support or lack thereof for "true believers" like Heidi Holland. Given Wasserstein's cyclic overtures, however, Chapter 4 briefly revisits the communal aspects in Uncommon Women and Others and Isn't It Romantic, compares Heidi's struggles to those faced by her predecessors, and, in a nod toward the mother-daughter motif, analyzes her decision in the end to adopt a baby girl.

Devoted to The Sisters Rosensweig, "Of Life and Men" illustrates that Wasserstein's most recent play concludes her thematic cycle by asking the mid-life question, "Where have I been?" Inclined to accept that the best sisterhood is perhaps achieved more reliably within family, Wasserstein mainly seems resigned in this work that uncommon women cannot "have it all" and in particular cannot simultaneously sustain a meaningful career and a successful, intimate relationship with a man.

The final chapter, "Fem-en(act)ment Revisited," recapitulates the study's conclusions and asserts that Wasserstein's plays collectively comprise a my-story of the impact of the women's movement.

Considering the feminist vision in Wasserstein's work, as well as the contemporary quality of her themes and the numerous honors she has garnered, I believe that a comprehensive and scholarly undertaking of her oeuvre is overdue. Through this study, I hope to establish Wendy Wasserstein as a major playwright and to prove that her commitment to fem-en(act)ment succeeds not only as literature but also as an intelligent observation of both human and feminist concerns in modern times.

Chapter 2

Wasserstein's Uncommon Women

"Heart and Mind Together"

"The heart is the capital of the mind,
The mind is a single state
heart and mind together make
A single continent."

--Emily Dickinson, recited by Mrs. Plumm
in Uncommon Women and Others

"As a playwright," says Wasserstein, "first and foremost you must be true to your characters" (Betsko 420). Resolute in this self-defined standard, Wasserstein develops in her work a series of distinctive personalities, each of whom emerges with a unique style of rhetoric, spirit, and subsequent growth as she responds, in particular, to the impact of the women's movement in her life. While imbued with rich detail and emotional integrity, however, Wasserstein's protagonists collectively possess, as well, certain mutual characteristics that also fashion a type of woman--"uncommon woman"--whose life and struggles the playwright illustrates.

One of the most vital aspects of Wasserstein's women lies with their not-so-ordinary class constituency, a point that clearly precludes any suggestion that her plays foster some universal portrayal of women or of the conditions--both monetary and social--under which they live. In an interview

with Esther Cohen, Wasserstein describes her heroines specifically as "middle class, upper middle class people. . . . not Philip Barry people, but . . . not sort of working class" (Cohen 261). The wealthiest is Sara Goode (The Sisters Rosensweig), a highly-successful American careerist, who, although she might be the antithesis of Barry's socialites in Holiday and The Philadelphia Story, lives in a fabulous London home "decorator 'done' with . . . expensive chintz" furnishings (3). As a rule, Wasserstein's major characters do not manifest Sara's elegant or affluent lifestyle, but with the exception of Gorgeous Teitelbaum, who reveals financial setbacks at the end of The Sisters Rosensweig, most of them seem comfortably solvent and unaffected by the economic concerns that at one time or another dog most people, including the middle class. Significantly, therefore, while money and social class do not define much about them personally, Wasserstein's characters can and do consider whatever paths the women's movement has made available to them without the complications of fiscal insecurity that might inform the choices of those less fortunate.

Although early family backgrounds account somewhat for their socio-economic status, these women evoke a middle-class identity mainly for other reasons. For one, as Thomas Kozikowski notes, they all have college educations (453),

and while Uncommon Women and Others elucidates this point by taking place at Mount Holyoke College and at a private reunion of its graduates, Wasserstein's other plays reveal that "uncommon women" also attend graduate school. In Isn't It Romantic, Janie Blumberg has completed a master's degree, her friend Harriet Cornwall has a Harvard MBA, and Heidi Holland (The Heidi Chronicles) is a Vassar graduate with a Ph.D. from Yale. In other words, Wasserstein's women are uncommonly intelligent, a fact epitomized in particular by Sara Goode, a Radcliffe alumna whom nearly everyone describes as "brilliant" (Sisters 23, 30, 31).

Significantly, Wasserstein's women have translated these stellar educations into interesting, sometimes lucrative careers. As Wasserstein says with ironic understatement, they all "have good jobs" (Cohen 261). Kate Quin (Uncommon Women and Others), for example, is a lawyer; Harriet Cornwall, a marketing researcher at Colgate-Palmolive; Heidi Holland, professor of art at Columbia University; Pfeni Rosensweig, a globe-trotting journalist; her "brilliant" sister, Sara, an executive for the Hong Kong/Shanghai Bank.

Though this profusion of superlatively successful women in Wasserstein's works primarily allows her to explore the particular complexities with which a prosperous careerist must deal in order to "have it all," the educational and

career-driven framework also results in the subtle but unmistakable presence of empowerment, another vital component her characters share. According to Jill Dolan, since power, "sexuality, and desire have historical connotations assigned by the dominant culture . . . that have restricted women's abilities to express themselves" (Spectator 81), these attributes have traditionally been associated in both life and art with masculinity. Not only does Wasserstein defy history by allowing her characters to overcome these cultural and sexist restraints, but at the same time, because her characters come "of age in the late 1960s as feminism was redefining American society" (Kozikowski 453), she also reflects this struggle through their collective ascent to powerful careers, compiling in the process a dramatic history of the emergence of feminist influence and its practical repercussions.

Feminism, however, did more than enable women to hold powerful positions. It also reshaped attitudes toward women's private lives and especially toward previously unquestioned matters involving marriage, motherhood, and sexuality. Unsurprisingly, then, nearly all of Wasserstein's characters are influenced by these revolutions as well. For one, they not only lead sexually active lives but, as Rita Altabel, Harriet Cornwall, and Heidi Holland demonstrate, they also speak candidly about them. Pfeni Rosensweig--

seemingly unconcerned about AIDS--makes no secret of the fact, for example, that she sleeps with the bisexual Geoffrey Duncan, and Uncommon Women and Others "contains enough specific sex talk to cover the walls of every women's lavatory in the World Trade Center" (Eder 48). In other words, Wasserstein's women claim the right not only to define their public and private spaces but also to *speak* publicly about personal issues previously considered taboo to conversation.

Though the casual and open sexuality of her characters parallels the transformation in contemporary mores, their attitudes toward more long-term commitments mirror modern times to an even greater degree. The "class of '69," writes Wasserstein, "had no intention of waking up from a marriage at forty-five, abandoned in a Scarsdale kitchen, with the kids in college" (Bachelor Girls 146). In keeping with these sentiments, therefore, the majority of Wasserstein's major characters are not married. In Uncommon Women and Others, all but Rita Altabel and Samantha Stewart remain single by the time of the restaurant reunion, and although Harriet Cornwall announces her unexpected engagement at the end of Isn't It Romantic, Janie Blumberg breaks hers. Heidi Holland refuses to sacrifice her career for marriage, Sara Goode has divorced two husbands, and Pfeni Rosensweig seems

uninterested in a permanent relationship or passively resigned to not having one.

Most of Wasserstein's heroines also remain childless. As Kate Quin notes in Uncommon Women and Others, not one of the group has had children by the time of their reunion; and although Heidi Holland, in another contemporary phenomenon, adopts a baby girl at the play's end, the only characters throughout the oeuvre to have biological children are Sara Goode and her sister Gorgeous Teitelbaum.

Though on one hand these circumstances seem to support Elizabeth Natalle's view that characters in feminist-guided plays "establish themselves as people first, and as mothers or wives second" (117), of far greater significance is that the personal choices of *these* women to form or not form families are tied to the demands of their careers and of the times. As Kim Hubbard observes, Wasserstein's characters "like herself, [are] women struggling toward self-definition amid ever-changing societal imperatives, to be a wife and mother, to have a lucrative profession; to do it all and look as good as Meryl Streep" (101). Consequently, despite their education and successes, Wasserstein's women exhibit, subtly or otherwise, a simultaneous mixture of uncertainty, apprehension, and weariness as they examine not only the "endless preponderance of options" (Stein 25) but also the limited solutions available for juggling them.

Speaking of Uncommon Women and Others, in particular, Wasserstein confirms that these unprecedented choices confronting her heroines do indeed make them feel painfully bewildered. "The play asks: 'Why are they so confused?' I want to *show* you their confusion. But it's not saying I have any answers" (Betsko 420). In effect, this sums up the state of all her characters, as well as the plots of all her plays, and the confusion she names derives from the impact of feminism.

For Wasserstein, the impact of feminism and the quandaries it produces have profound consequences, both positive and negative. "What's troublesome, from my point of view, about the Women's Movement," she says, "is that there are *more* checkmarks to earn nowadays. More pressure" (Betsko 420). "The women's movement, the movement that said "Your voice is worthwhile," is the only reason I feel like a person. But what still needs to change is that women shouldn't beat themselves up for their choices'" (Hubbard 106). But they do. In fact, every one of Wasserstein's characters continually considers and reconsiders the wisdom of her decisions as she tries "to do it all."

Invariably, this process leads most of them to an ongoing either/or predicament that delays or compromises both marriage and their desire to have children in the face of other self-enhancing goals. As a result, implies

Hubbard, Wasserstein and her uncommon women exemplify not only a cultural trend toward this predicament, similar to the way they show the burden of decision about career-empowerment, but also a trend toward later marriages, failed marriages, and statistically-increased single households, especially among middle-class and upper-middle-class women.

Though they prevail while negotiating peace with their professional and private choices, the uncertainties endured by Wasserstein's women create unfortunate, though not debilitating, vulnerability. At its most intense level, for example, Heidi Holland practically pleads with a roomful of other women that she feels "stranded" (232), while Sara Goode's "brilliant" and "hard" (34, 38) personality barely disguises her distracted self-consciousness. To defend themselves against this vulnerability, Wasserstein's protagonists frequently rely not only on humor, as the previous chapter notes, but also on the support of other uncommon women, who, as Chapter 4 will show, are sometimes undependable.

Contrary to miring herself in confusion, misgivings, and questions, though, every Wasserstein heroine still persists in her belief that she can attain total self-fulfillment, regardless of what it involves. Consequently, even though she might not resolve her conflicts, her perseverance fosters its own rewards. "Usually," states

Dinah Leavitt, "the ending of a [feminist-guided] play shows the protagonists reaching some new awareness" (95), and with the exception of her characters in Uncommon Women and Others, perhaps, Wasserstein's women also experience some outer transformation or inner epiphany by the conclusion of each work. The truce that Janie Blumberg, Heidi Holland, and the Rosensweig sisters make with their dilemmas, for instance, appears to result on a subtle level in quiet self-acceptance. On a more dramatic one, however, it also results in Janie's rejection of marriage, and Heidi's adoption of a child with her feminist integrity still intact.

"What's really liberating," says Wasserstein, "is developing from the inside out" (Betsko 420), a statement that definitively characterizes the evolution of all her heroines, despite their ongoing angst and regardless of their resolutions. More than just "endure," as Howard Stein concludes (22), each one assumes her own distinct risks and arrives at a better understanding about herself and her relationships with others, "even if that means," says Wasserstein, commenting on Janie Blumberg's broken engagement, that "she's going to be alone. . . . sit in her apartment and cry every night" (Betsko 421).

Given all the criteria associated with Wasserstein's characters, it would be reasonable to conclude that they resemble a lot of women, both common and uncommon,

especially with regard to sexual conduct and the periodic bouts of vulnerability and uncertainty that tend to be universal. Yet, the composite profile that emerges from reviewing Wasserstein's plays yields a *specifically* middle-class, well-educated woman whose personal and professional ambitions cause a unique rather than universal kind of lifelong struggle with self and others. Uncommon Women and Others introduces her and reveals for the first time the underlying cause of this struggle and the principal theme with which this study deals: the impact of the women's movement on private life.

Fulfilling Potential: Where Am I Going?

All people deserve to fulfill their potential.
--Heidi Holland to Scoop Rosenbaum in The Heidi Chronicles

"Women, Where Are We Going?"
--the topic of Heidi's speech to the Miss Crain's School East Coast Alumnae Association

According to Wasserstein, Uncommon Women and Others examines the lives of "college seniors in the seventies who, faced with the real world, explore their feelings about marriage and careers versus their background in tea and gracious living" (Bachelor Girls 176). At one time traditional staples of Mount Holyoke education, "tea" and "gracious living" in effect sought to prepare young women for the more genteel activities and social graces they might

need to manage the home of a successful Ivy League husband. By the late 1960s, however, these traditions collided with the messages of the women's movement and, as this play shows, scored rapidly expanding options with deep uncertainty.

Uncommon Women and Others, says Wasserstein, "is in a way about feminism. . . . filtered through the people who were participating in it at that time" (Cohen 268). Its presence persists unflinchingly throughout the play, both in the 1978 reunion scenes and in those set at Mount Holyoke. In the latter case, several situations indicate very clearly, in fact, that the characters know a great deal about the modern women's movement even in its early stages. They discuss Germaine Greer, author of The Female Eunuch (1970), for instance, and several of them take a women's-history course which requires the reading of Kate Millet's gender-war opus, Sexual Politics, as well as Betty Friedan's 1963 classic, The Feminine Mystique, which dubbed women's domestic malaise "The Problem That Has No Name" (15). As Wasserstein notes, the "class of '69 heard what Betty, Kate, and Germaine had to say. There were choices to be made, priorities to be weighed" (Bachelor Girls 146). In short, they heard the message and they acted on it.

However, even in the midst of a course that advances the thinking of Wasserstein's feminist triumvirate, the

young women sift through mixed messages that cloud the directions that they think feminism has opened for them. Their instructor, Chip Knowles, for example, still espouses to them the doctrine of penis envy, the Freudian theory that suggests men have physical and psychological advantages that women purportedly covet. "The only people who have penis envy are other men," dismisses Holly Kaplan, but a worried Kate Quin, on the other hand, thinks it "entirely possible" that she herself evinces it (59).

At times, as well, Knowles seems to impart the idea that women's private responsibilities still prevail over their professional prerogatives. He tells them, for instance, that his wife, a full-time homemaker and mother who graduated first in her class from Vassar, "may be mopping with her hands, but with her mind she's reliving the water imagery in the *Faerie Queene*" (24), as though her top-notch education is not lost, still matters, and somehow justifies or mitigates the imperative to clean.

Additional evidence of conflicting signals in Knowles' course emerges in Muffet DiNicola's story of "this French dish" who, unprepared for her class report on Rosie the Riveter, receives a standing ovation when she announces, "'you girls are wasting your time. You should do more avec what you have down here--[Muffet] *points to her breasts*--than avec what you have up here'--*points to her head*" (25).

After "two months of reading about suffragettes and courageous choices" (24), Holly and Rita Altabel leave the class in protest, but "I didn't do anything," says Muffet. "I felt so confused. I mean this chick is an obvious imbecile. But I didn't think she was entirely wrong either" (25).

Another agent of mixed messages appears in several pre-scene introductions provided in all but one case by a disembodied male voice. Loosely related to the events in the scenes themselves, the material for these voice-overs derives in part from the 1966-1967 Mount Holyoke College Bulletin and from a 1957 inaugural speech entitled "A Plea for the Uncommon Woman" by Richard Glenn Gettell, president of the college. Though they advocate challenge and intellectual growth for women, a number of these preludes dilute their effect with conventional thinking. One, for example, puts forward the familiar ethic of female self-sacrifice by proposing that "an educated woman's capacity for giving is not exhausted, but stimulated, by demands" (24). The most ironic of these segments, however, occurs against the backdrop of commencement exercises, where the last male announcer proclaims, by "the time a class has been out ten years, more than nine-tenths of its members are married, and many of them devote a number of years exclusively to bringing up a family" (64).

Essentially, this convergence of societal and feminist influence forms the philosophical center against which Wasserstein's young women struggle to determine the course of their uncommon futures. Some, like Kate and Leilah, translate their newfound options into tangible graduation plans, though not without terrible angst. Others, like Muffet, Holly, and Rita, remain unsure what to do with those options and, much to their chagrin, have no idea what direction suits their talents.

The only one who appears to know what she wants is Samantha Stewart, a pre-feminist prototype whose cheerful disposition and unassuming manner seem so suited for the traditional role of good wife that Rita calls her the "perfect" (39) or "ideal woman" (54). Seemingly unfazed and unbefuddled by the choices facing her--or terrorized by them--she announces early in the second act her intention to marry Robert Cabe, an aspiring actor whom she characterizes cryptically as "better than me" (26). According to Douglas Watt, Samantha is simply a "born homebody" ("Holyoke Hen Sessions" 27), but as her self-comparison to Cabe suggests, she lacks perhaps the confidence or self-esteem she believes her friends possess to do something more than "be [Robert's] audience, and have my picture, behind him, in . . . the New York Times" (26).

If so, advances Richard Eder, Samantha at least recognizes her emotional limitations (48). A "little talented at a lot of things" (54), she says, "I'm not as strong as . . . Kate" (38), or as "capable" as Muffet (26), or as "incredible" as Rita (54). However, while her friends seemingly respect Samantha's decision "to devote [her] uncommon talents to relationships" (54), this self-described mission still appears somewhat forced and desperate. In fact, Samantha sounds a lot like someone who feels plainly ambivalent or fearful for an uncertain future, and as a result, says Edmund Newton, she "opts for subsuming herself in a tepid marriage" (22).

Unlike Samantha, the others expect to capitalize on the currents of feminist consciousness with more independent and dazzling outcomes. In terms of potential, the most exceptional one of the group is Kate Quin, a Phi Beta Kappa, who says, "I have a stake in all those Uncommon Women expectations. . . . [and] know how to live up to them well" (56). Inspired by her extraordinary talents and by the newly-paved options of the women's movement, Kate establishes her professional goals from the play's beginning and, with self-fulfilling prophecy, succeeds in mobilizing her resources into an acceptance to Harvard Law School.

Despite her focus and unwavering direction, however, Kate feels a harrowing incertitude about the wisdom of her

decision. Like most Wasserstein characters, she worries about--and will experience--the fallout of her studious and business-like approach to private life. In fact, along with Leilah and Rita, she actually voices some of Wasserstein's own qualms about the "checkmarks" women feel they must earn against the promises of the women's movement.

For Kate, in particular, "everything seems so programmed" that she's afraid she will "grow up to be a cold efficient lady in a gray business suit" (55-56). This parallels Wasserstein's reservation regarding, specifically, whether "the purpose of all this [was] so 21-year-old girls can get M.B.A.'s'" (McGuigan 77). As subsequent chapters show, this kind of periodic ambivalence replays in her other dramas, as well, usually when certain situations begin to overwhelm the characters and force them to consider not only the prices they pay to achieve their goals but also which goals are themselves worth the sacrifices.

In Leilah's case, this ambivalence begins to emerge when the drive to succeed as an uncommon woman leads her to unhealthy preoccupations with measuring up to Kate's extraordinary potential. Already feeling the imminent pressure of the corporate world's duel between the superlative and merely superior, Leilah observes that "Katies seem kind of magical, and the Leilahs are highly competent" (49). Locked in competition with the Kates of

Mount Holyoke, Leilah frequently skips dinner and other social functions for "more reading" she must do (17, 31), and in an effort to distance herself from the Philosophy Department's comparisons between her and Kate, she surprises everyone by announcing her intentions to attend anthropology graduate school and to do research in Iraq.

For Muffet, Leilah's plans seem "odd" (48); for Kate, they indicate Leilah's attempt "to make [her]self exotic" (31) and to escape the insecurities she feels when threatened. However "exotic" Leilah's plans appear, though, she clearly represents Wasserstein's concern for the kinds of damaging rivalries that arise out of the professional opportunities women have discovered in the wake of feminism. "It's important," she says, "that there isn't one woman slot that puts you all in competition with each other" (Hubbard 106). This, however, replicates precisely what Leilah experiences. In response to Muffet's and Kate's criticisms, she confesses, "I think I just need to be in a less competitive culture" (49).

Even Rita Altabel, the "outrageous Ms." (Beaufort, "Wry Reunion" 140) of the group, who embraces a feminist sensibility unequivocally, recognizes the pitfalls of unbridled career advancement to which the women's movement invited them. With no definitive graduation plans, she tells Mrs. Plumm that "hopping onto the corporate and

professional ladder--is just as self-destructive" as getting married and giving up one's "self-support, [and] spontaneous creativity . . . trying to convert a male half-person into a whole person" (65-66). She finds neither solution satisfying.

These fears about human detachment, competition, and corporate politics that Kate, Leilah, and Rita respectively raise constitute Wasserstein's guarded, but evident materialist inquiry into the traps that women negotiate not only as they balance the private sphere with the public and the old rhetoric with the new but also as they adopt a male value system to which they unwittingly, perhaps, have become heirs. As Rita so comically asserts, if "you spend your whole life proving yourself, then you just become a man, which is where the whole problem began, and continues" (66). As Chapter 1 establishes, though, this inquiry retains the mode of observation, not reformation. Wasserstein and her characters still want the goods--and, consequently, regardless of their misgivings, not only do they resolutely maintain their feminist impulse but they also internalize the exhortations of liberal and power feminists to fulfill their uncommon potential.

Despite no prospect other than a nebulous intention to write a novel, Rita's refrain that "when we're thirty we're going to be pretty . . . amazing" (42) underscores this

determination. So certain is she that her "newfound female pride" comprises "an untapped natural resource" that she spurns an allegedly demeaning position at a publishing firm and says, "I refuse to live down to expectation. If I can just hold out . . . I'll be incredible" (60).

As a contrapuntal figure to Samantha and Susie Friend, a "one-dimensional" stock character (Susan Carlson 571) who represents the college's fading social traditions, Rita operates as the class radical and principal agent of what John Beaufort calls "feminist newspeak" ("Wry Reunion" 140). She justifies her own sexual freedom and "conquest," for example, as a revolt against "being . . . programmed for male approval" (33) and later complains that "everything I can name is male. When I see things this way . . . it's very easy to feel alienated and alone for the simple reason that I've never been included 'cause I came into the world without a penis" (34).

Like so many of Wasserstein's characters, however, Rita also relies on humor to mask the vulnerability she feels in the face of male prerogative. In her more "hilarious rush[es] of feminist anguish" (Newton 22), for instance, she ridicules male sexual banter by drolly mimicking it during one of her many creative "games," and in another scene deadpans that "all men should be forced to menstruate." "The only problem," she says, "is that some . . . schmuck would

write about it for the Village Voice and he would become the new expert on women's inner life" (37).

The primary source of Rita's vulnerability, however, derives from the same "mixture of hope and apprehension" (Kozikowski 454) that they all feel. For her and Holly, though, this confusing state has different repercussions than it does for the others. In fact, as Wasserstein observes, the play in many respects centers mainly on them. It "examines the fact," she says, "that the Women's Movement has had answers for the Kates of the world (she becomes a lawyer), or the Samanthas (she gets married). But for the creative people, a movement can't provide answers" (Betsko 424).

Although Rita dreams vaguely of writing a novel and finding a "Leonard Woolf" (11, 69) to support and inspire her, Holly has even less vision. According to Wasserstein, "Holly . . . , autobiographically, is closest to me" (Betsko 424), a statement reinforced by the fact that the playwright herself had not even the faintest sense of direction after finishing college. As she told her audience in a commencement address at Mount Holyoke in May 1990, "I immediately spilled beer all over" someone on the night before her graduation when he had asked what she planned to do. "Frankly, I had no idea what was to become of me."

Like Rita, Holly defuses her insecurities with humor, although her less caustic wit and general warmth make her, says Douglas Watt, "the most appealing" of the play's characters ("Holyoke Hen Sessions" 27). Lacking self-confidence in both her academic life and her relationships with men, Holly tells Leilah that "[s]ometimes I want to clean up my desk and go out and say, 'Respect me; I'm a respectable grown-up,' and other times I just want to jump into a paper bag and shake and bake myself to death" (36).

Like Wasserstein, who did not feel "especially happy" at Mount Holyoke (Barney 54), Holly's "strongest attachments [are] to [her] women friends" ("Chic Love" 116), even though she also feels undistinguished alongside them. Her best hopes for the future, she thinks, hinge on "living through [someone else's] accomplishments" (40), a prospect that confounds and disconcerts the success-bound Kate. Though sexually active, Holly has no one special in her life to fulfill that dream, a situation that plagues her trademark insecurity enough to result in desperate phone calls and what Wasserstein characterizes as one "very raw" monologue (Cohen 267) to a Minneapolis doctor met during a museum excursion with Muffet.

According to Alma Cuervo, who played Holly in the original production, "'Holly is one of the people Rita talks about who will be pretty amazing; it will just take her a

little longer'" (Gates 5), a rather prescient observation, as it turns out. In the curtain-call coda that Wasserstein added to the 1994 revival of the play, Muffet as the class "scribe" for their alumnae magazine writes that Holly has just completed "her second book, Gracious Living: Educating Women from Emily Dickinson to Hillary Rodham Clinton" (unpublished ms. 78).

Like Holly, Muffet has not a single concrete plan by graduation, plaintively telling Mrs. Plumm, the group's housemother, "I'm assuming something is going to happen to me" (65). Presumably because of her overnights with an Ivy Leaguer whom she unceremoniously calls "Pink Pants" (50), Muffet appears in the play less often than Samantha, Kate, Rita, and Holly and therefore seems--like Leilah--a little less developed than they are. What does emerge clearly about her, however, is that despite exploring women's studies and the groundwork that feminism has laid for her to fulfill her potential, Muffet still very much desires the traditional security of marriage. "I suppose this isn't a very impressive sentiment," she says, "but I would really like to meet my prince" (25). Asking Samantha why "I haven't met my Heathcliff yet" (26), Muffet knows, however, that even though she acts like a fool for him sometimes, the non-committal "Pink Pants" will not become that prince.

Other students who also appear intermittently include minor characters Susie Friend and Carter. According to Wasserstein, "Susie Friend was a device. If you see 'Uncommon Women' as a spectrum of women: on one end, there's Susie Friend, and on the other, there's Carter, the intellectual" (Betsko 423). Reminiscent of the "archetypes rather than realistic personalities" found in feminist theatre groups (Natalle 90), they operate, therefore, as contrasting measures for the options facing the other women. Susie, a saccharine personality who induced Richard Eder to call her a "comic cartoon" (48) seems at the one extreme largely unfazed by feminist consciousness and acts principally as a "booster for outmoded college traditions" (Kozikowski 454). At the other extreme, the catatonic Carter, who functions in the play mainly as a "sounding board or wailing wall against which others can reveal their sins and neuroses" (O'Connor, "TV Tonight" C24), effects the aura of a "stereotypical genius" (Kozikowski 454) who will exceed even the most uncommon expectations.

Modeled on a Mount Holyoke housemother named Camilla Peach (Albright), another minor character who appears in the play is Mrs. Plumm, who, according to Douglas Watt's somewhat limited observation, only "emphasize[s] the school's principles" ("Holyoke Hen Sessions" 27). On the contrary, however, Mrs. Plumm also operates, like Susie and

Carter, as a device, specifically as one of two that, in part, serve to anchor the structure of Wasserstein's work.

In this instance, Mrs. Plumm's small speeches secure the beginning, middle, and end of the play by framing the conditions of societal change that contribute to the "massive insecurity" Wasserstein says the group experiences (Elder 27). Welcoming the students to North Stimson Hall early in Act One, for example, Mrs. Plumm sets the stage for the play's principal action, the women's yearlong search for self-identity, with a quote from Emily Dickinson: "This ecstatic nation / Seek--it is yourself," she recites (14). Although she immediately proceeds to reinforce the lessons of tea and gracious living that presumably will make them exceptional hostesses someday and seemingly advances some traditional female destiny at the play's mid-point by relating her long-ago decision to acquiesce to her father's wishes by simply marrying and teaching high school (47), by the play's end she abandons convention and acknowledges the uncertainties and possibilities wrought by the women's movement. "I have seen the world confronting Kate and her classmates expand," she says at her retirement. "The realm of choices can be overwhelming" (66). Then, despite her life as a "constant dutiful daughter," Plumm tells them that "I do not fear these changes," and with her own exotic plans to foray into

the world, she reflects that even she--like the young women--has entered a "transition period" (67).

This "transition period," both personal and political, still exists when the women convene six years later at the reunion lunch. According to John Simon, since Uncommon Women and Others is a memory play about still-youthful people, "[n]othing much has happened to them" during college or by the reunion, "and what has is far from unusual" ("The Group" 103). What eludes Simon, it seems to me, is that the socio-historic conditions against which the women consider and, in the meantime, implement their options do indeed make the circumstances unusual. Not only have they attended Mount Holyoke as it experiences the "last gasps of a generations-old policy of genteel mind-bending" (Newton 22), but they also represent the first wave of college women exposed to contemporary feminism and the "unnerving world of women's goals and options" that it unfolded for them (Kalem 111).

As the reunion reveals about the five women there, however, they still have not achieved a satisfactory truce with the conflicting lures of private and professional desire, even though they have, if anything, largely reinforced or maintained their feminist sensibilities. Kate, for example, has become a successful Washington attorney attending a "women-and-law conference" at the time of their get-together (8). "I've become a feminist," she

says to Muffet (9), who herself has "taken a stand on birth-control pills. . . . [and] won't be manipulated by the pharmaceutical establishment" (9).

Nevertheless, despite "already [being] incredible," as Holly says (12), Kate has also begun to experience the cold efficiency she feared during her college years (56). Confessing to her friends that she feels "a little numb lately" (71), she can't decide whether or not to have a child, and she has just ended a relationship with a man who objected to her building a career in which her only time off falls on Election Day (70). "It never occurred to me in college," says Kate musing on her break-up, "that someone wouldn't want me to be quite so uncommon" (69).

Muffet in the intervening years has become "an insurance-seminar hostess" (9). Like Kate, she has paid a price in her private life for the demands of her professional one. "I mean, where [is] my prince?" she asks. Unlike Kate, however, Muffet feels a little more upbeat about her achievements. "I won't be in the alumnae magazine like you, Katie, at the Justice Department," she says. "But I never thought I'd be supporting myself, and I am" (69).

Professionally and privately, the others, however, have not fared so well as Kate and Muffet. The pregnant Samantha "guess[es]" she has a good marriage to Robert Cabe, but regrets that she hasn't "done very much of anything

important" (70). Holly, still unfocused, has embarked on her third tour of graduate school, and Rita still entertains hopes of writing a novel, even with the apparently lacking inspiration from her would-be "Leonard Woolf," whom she married, she says, "to be protected" like Samantha (69).

Although Holly quips that she "hate[s] the women's movement" because of a rejection slip from Ms. magazine (12), she, Samantha, and Rita, like Kate and Muffet, still cling to the spirit of feminism, and even Samantha has tentatively explored the possibilities of what Rita calls "really getting into women's things" (11). Through the reunion itself, though, Wasserstein also shows that they rediscover one effect of the women's movement, in particular, that they may have taken for granted. As Susan Carlson observes, Uncommon Women and Others ultimately reveals not only how feminism freed women from "the requirement that they bond only with men" (570) but also how in the wake of that it bred what Holly characterizes as the "comfort and acceptance" she remembers from the female community of her college years (71). Muffet concurs that "the one thing I miss in Hartford is having women friends" (9), and even Kate muses, "I don't think I appreciated women then, as much as I do now" (12). Without the foresight in 1977 about what their departure from the restaurant really means, however, this play does not make clear what

Wasserstein's later works--notably The Heidi Chronicles--make us realize: that the women will resume their lives isolated from one another and, as Chapter 4 discusses, unfulfilled by the promises of sisterhood.

Serving as the play's primary anchoring device, the two reunion scenes create a bookend effect, and in particular form a quasi-prologue and epilogue wrapped around a series of 14 "Polaroid" flashbacks (Kalem 111). Describing her episodic format, which Chapter 1 typifies as feminist-inspired, to be "an odd sort of documentary" (Betsko 430), Wasserstein deliberately inserts these first and last shots as a reunion in order to exercise a vantage point from which the women can evaluate the repercussions of their college years and the progress made since then.

Though, in short, the reunion reveals that most of the women "seem confused and unfulfilled" (Kozikowski 454), Wasserstein's coda added in 1994 suggests that twenty years after graduation, they have--for better or worse--negotiated their paths more clearly. Living up to the uncommon expectations set for them by the combined forces of feminism and individual talents, Muffet, for example, has advanced to "Executive Vice President at National Colonial Insurance," and despite never having found her prince, she evinces little regret for not "juggling" a husband or children. Holly, as previously revealed, has followed her "best-

selling" first book with another; Kate Quin has realized everyone's predictions for an exceptional future as "number two at Justice Department, living with number two at H.U.D. and raising two boys"; and even the competition-shy Leilah, who, Muffet reveals at the 1978 reunion, had married an Iraqi journalist-archeologist and converted to Islam, "holds [a] Princess Palavi Professorship in Middle Eastern studies" at Oxford University. As for the "Others" of Wasserstein's title, Samantha, surviving her seeming uncertainty at the reunion, remains married with four children, and Rita is "still in Vermont. Still writing her novel," and with characteristic humor, "looking forward to estrogen therapy" (unpublished ms. 78).

As the coda discloses, the women have apparently managed to balance, compromise, or ignore the conflicts previously experienced in the original play's reunion and flashbacks. Despite its optimism, however, I prefer to approach Wasserstein's new ending with guarded skepticism. As a pat summation, for one, the coda leaps through years of unknown grief and triumph, and secondly, it appears only as a brief, fact-infused alumnae-magazine update. Given the opportunity to talk among themselves again, the women might reveal to one another--as they do during their private reunion--reservations or disappointments in their lives that would not find their way into a class publication. To warn

against a too rosy picture, in fact, Muffet concludes the coda not only by stating, "Please write me with any news. I'm willing to lie," but also by altering Rita's refrain to "'When we're *fifty* [italics mine] we're going to be pretty . . . amazing'" (unpublished ms. 79).

Ultimately, Wasserstein says she doesn't "know what actually happens in [this] play," but her working vision of "women sitting around talking," at least on a simple level, sums up both its drift and rhythm (Betsko 430, 419). As Chapter 1 establishes, nothing much seems to occur in a feminist-inspired play like this one, but true to Wasserstein's inception of Uncommon Women and Others as something in which "women's voices could be heard" (Betsko 426), it is, according to Sue-Ellen Case, a "familiar example" of feminist drama that foregrounds experiences that "had never before been staged" (Feminism and Theater 67). As Ellen Parker, who played Muffet in the original production, remembers, "'the play allowed women to talk about themselves'" and the circumstances affecting them in a manner that few, if anyone, could remember in plays prior to it. "'It was,'" she says, "'an exciting shock to see all of these smart, funny women going on about themselves in this way'" (Gates 40).

In reality, though, they do more than talk. As Howard Stein notes, these characters "laugh and cry and joke and

love and hate and hug and kiss and smile and touch and play and work, everything that common people do . . . while waiting for Godot" (22). In this case, however, Godot materializes much more specifically into the heady, yet terrifying fortunes made possible by the women's movement; far from being "common," the journey undertaken by feminism's first wave of college graduates into an uncharted future produces, as Janie Blumberg, Heidi Holland, and the Rosensweigs later demonstrate, a woman and state of being forever uncommon.

Chapter 3

Having It All: A Woman Is [Not] Her Mother

"[H]aving it all"? Harriet, that's just your generation's fantasy.

--Lillian Cornwall to her daughter in
Isn't It Romantic

A woman is her mother.

That's the main thing.

--Anne Sexton, "Housewife"

Isn't It Romantic provides the first glimpse into Wasserstein's propensity toward a feminist-inspired cyclic style of writing and, more specifically, toward re-viewing issues and themes raised in her previous plays. In this case, observes Michiko Kakutani, Isn't It Romantic virtually "takes up where . . . Uncommon Women and Others . . . left off" (C9) and resumes Wasserstein's primary and recurring examination into the impact of the women's movement on private life, and, in particular, into the same confusions regarding career, marriage, and motherhood that troubled her characters in the preceding play. Presented four years after Uncommon Women and Others and revised in 1983, Isn't It Romantic shifts its perspective significantly, however, from the more comfortable perch of campus life, where feminist ideals are mostly *debated*, to the more challenging world of two 28-year-old women, who must not only get on

with their lives but also deal with the "emotional static" of others' expectations (Kakutani C9).

Although Wasserstein centers her play on two longtime friends, Janie Blumberg and Harriet Cornwall, Isn't It Romantic primarily "focus[es] on the emotional growth of Janie" (Moritz 612). Unlike her predecessors in Uncommon Women and Others, Janie does not talk about feminism per se or its relationship to the decisions she must make, but Wasserstein consistently dramatizes--sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly--that at both a philosophical and realistic level, it has influenced Janie profoundly. While Janie modestly demonstrates this influence by rebutting Marty Sterling's unflattering comment on women doctors as "extremely disturbing and discriminatory" (98), for instance, the most crucial indication of feminism's impact on her emerges as she attempts to situate its practical repercussions in her personal life.

Armed with a master's degree and a new apartment, Janie conveys--conceptually, even if not physically--the image of a modern, independent, "uncommon woman," who expects to fulfill career ambitions that pre-feminist women 20 years her senior rarely imagined. Specifically, she hopes to become a writer, but, like Holly Kaplan and Rita Altabel, she doesn't know yet how to channel her talent into something meaningful. In the midst of trying to jump-start

her career, however, Janie begins a serious relationship with Marty Sterling, a wealthy young physician whose notions about marriage and motherhood collide with Janie's feminist ideals. Though Wasserstein does not actually name it, Marty's vision for Janie essentially looks like the "feminine mystique," the fundamental lifestyle--and, prior to the women's movement, practically the only one--which, according to Betty Friedan, "defined women solely in terms of their relation to men as wives, mothers and homemakers" (Second Stage 27). Although it takes her until the end of the play to make a decision, Janie eventually resists the efforts of both her parents and Marty to lure her, even when it begins to seem remotely attractive, into the thinly veiled "feminine mystique," which ultimately contradicts Janie's conviction that "[d]ependency. . . [is] not a solution" (82).

As Mel Gussow observes, however, "[r]esisting dependency is no small feat" for Janie ("New 'Romantic'" C3). At the onset of the play, Wasserstein characterizes Janie as "a little unconfident" (81), but, realistically speaking, this is an understatement. Until Janie undergoes a poignant metamorphosis by the end of Act 2, she largely imparts a fractured sense of self-esteem and what Richard Corliss calls "a rather complacent identity crisis" (80). "I have very little courage," she tells Marty Sterling on

their first dinner date. "I am far too lazy and self-involved. . . . have very fat thighs, and I want very badly to be someone else without going through the effort of actually changing myself into someone else" (98).

According to Wasserstein, Janie is "strong, but she doesn't know it" (Betsko 420). Unfortunately, the fact that her friends and family also don't know it not only interferes with her capacity to make life decisions but also leads them to impose their expectations on her. Equally formidable at times, Marty wants Janie to let him arrange their lives together, the Blumbergs think that Janie has waited long enough to find a husband to take care of her, and Harriet acts as the stoical voice--albeit a fraudulent one, as it turns out--of feminist conscience and female independence. All of them, in other words, read Janie like a child in need of guidance, and, consequently, they assume the role of mentor, advisor, or "mother" to her.

The biggest nag of Janie's "mothers" is the real one, Tasha Blumberg, who Wasserstein readily admits "was modeled largely on my own" (Bachelor Girls 36). Describing her mother, Lola, as a "very eccentric. . . . Auntie Mame figure" who at one time went to "dancing classes six hours a day" (Cohen 264-65), Wasserstein has apparently recreated not just her mother's manners, interests, and voice in Tasha Blumberg but also a few of their own mother-daughter

confrontations that have in part prompted Wasserstein to call Isn't It Romantic "my most autobiographical play" (Free Library 1995). Kent Black, in fact, locates Wasserstein's mother "at the core of the struggle that gives her . . . work such resonance," an unsurprising observation given the fact that autobiography frequently informs and intensifies feminist-inspired literature and arises in this case out of the highly personal issues and emotional stakes with which Wasserstein deals in her own life. "'No matter how successful I become as a playwright,'" Black quotes her, "'my mother would still be thrilled to hear me tell her I'd just lost 20 pounds, gotten married and become a lawyer'" (154), a sentiment that Tasha echoes almost verbatim during her conversation with Lillian Cornwall in Act 2 (120).

Dressed in leotards and warming up to her Jazzercise tape, Tasha communicates uncontrolled energy when she first appears in the play. "I like life, life, life," she says. "I like go-go" (87), a quirky maxim that Wasserstein cites as one of Lola's favorite expressions (Bachelor Girls 16). Contentedly married to Simon Blumberg, Tasha has largely tailored her existence around the "feminine mystique," a lifestyle that she unrelentingly prescribes for Janie in the guise of "hav[ing] a nice life" with a "nice" man (120). "[L]ook nice. . . . Even when you throw out the garbage,"

she therefore advises (90). "[Y]ou never know who you might meet" (85).

When Janie first meets Marty Sterling, she wisecracks to Harriet that as soon as Tasha hears about him, she "will have the caterers on the other extension" (85). A kidney specialist whose father owns a restaurant chain, Marty, says Mel Gussow, is her "mother's dream figure of a son-in-law" ("New 'Romantic'" C3). Although she predictably does become obsessed with "the popover boy" (90), Tasha has lined up another potential suitor in case Janie's relationship with Marty disintegrates, a Russian cab driver whom the Blumbergs have known for five minutes and whom Simon will "take into the business" despite the fact that he "doesn't speak very much English" (105-06).

Although John Simon notes that Tasha is simply a "well-meaning but overnudging Jewish" parent ("Failing" 36), her quest to see Janie married never relents, even in the most unpropitious circumstances. As she and Simon prepare to toast Janie's new apartment, for example, Tasha cannot help adding, "I hope next year you live in another apartment and your father and I have to bring up four coffees" (89). Following this, in a hint-and-run response to her daughter's career prospects, Tasha points out that Janie's sister-in-law might eventually attend law school but only "when the children get a little older" (89), an interesting remark

given the fact that Tasha has "[j]ust one" grandchild, but "look[s] forward" to more (121).

While the pressure created on Janie may seem exaggerated, Wasserstein reveals that in her own life the obsession with marriage and having a family overshadows in her mother's mind everything she has accomplished. "'All that success intimidates a lot of men,'" says Lola (Miller H8). In Bachelor Girls, in fact, Wasserstein cites a telephone conversation in which her mother reportedly said, "'[y]our sister-in-law is pregnant and that means more to me than a million dollars or any play'" (20).

According to Nancy Chodorow, a mother's primary "identification and symbiosis with daughters is more likely to retain and emphasize narcissistic elements, that is, to be based on experiencing a daughter as an extension or double of a mother herself" (109). This principle may or may not completely account for Lola Wasserstein's feelings about her daughter, but it does shed light on Tasha Blumberg's preoccupation with Janie's marital prospects. Tasha, for instance, has defined her own life so clearly that when she totes a new attache case and calls herself an "executive mother" (92), she means it literally, even if not conventionally. Motherhood and, by association, being a wife and grandmother have become her "executive" position in life, but inevitably, no matter what the briefcase pretends

to suggest, her "career" amounts to nothing more than a classic case of the "feminine mystique."

Because she has found a true "partner" in Simon, this "career" may work for Tasha, but bringing Vladimir, the Russian cab driver, to Janie as a potential husband-at-whatever-cost does not reflect reality or, most importantly, her daughter's wishes. "I want you to be happy" (89) Tasha tells Janie, but to demand that Janie opt as Tasha did for "a nice life" basically creates Chodorow's context of a "narcissistic . . . extension or double" of self. Janie wants more than "a nice life," however, and when she finally has the courage to define herself to others, she and Tasha will face off in what Gussow calls the "mother-daughter showdown" in the play's final scene ("New 'Romantic'" C3).

Unlike Tasha, whose crusade for marriage, family, and the "feminine mystique" amounts to nothing much more than a gigantic nuisance, Marty makes demands that not only bear very real repercussions for Janie's future but also reflect his own diehard values and unwavering self-interest. Noting his--and everyone else's--tendency to become Janie's "mother," Benedict Nightingale describes Marty as "a parent camouflaged as a lover, a symptom of [Janie's] real problem, which is an umbilical cord as thick and strongly-shackled as a ship's cable" (H2). While I agree completely with Nightingale's estimation, especially as it applies to

Janie's seemingly dependent nature, it seems to me that Marty would try to assume the same parent/lover role--if he could get away with it--no matter whom he dated. With his traditional, almost old-fashioned view of the world, he has an unswerving resolve to live in Brooklyn, where childhood memories of Jewish life still appeal to him, and to find a wife who will unilaterally devote herself to the family, both of which he will attain by whatever luck, kindness, or tempered seduction he can muster.

Although his allegiance to Judaism would undoubtedly preclude a serious relationship with Harriet, whom he already knows from Harvard, Marty feels too threatened by Harriet and incapable of manipulating her or anyone like her to achieve his dreams. "She's not sweet, like you," he tells Janie (97). "She's like those medical-school girls. They're nice but they'd bite your balls off" (98). Janie, on the other hand, strikes him as more "attainable" (83), a characterization that I read to mean not just more "congenial" but also more "malleable." Janie, in this case, becomes a prize, a witty, educated woman in the feminist era whom he can love *and* maneuver into compromising her own hopes in order to fulfill his.

Although Wasserstein admits that Marty "isn't right" for Janie, she characterizes him as "a nice man" (Betsko 420-21), an observation with which most people--certainly

the characters in the play--would agree. I'm a little hesitant to dispute Wasserstein, of course, especially since Marty's apparent dedication to humane medical practice and his obvious affection for his father make him at least somewhat appealing. Though he also seems to care genuinely for Janie, Marty nonetheless wants to control her as well, and to do so he uses amiable prodding or direct ultimatum, both very disturbing.

At times, Marty reminds me improbably of Paul Stuart, the "sadist vice president at Colgate-Palmolive" (129), with whom Harriet has an affair and whom Marty describes--ironically--as the "least gracious man [he] ever met" (128). Paul, who refers to Harriet as "Beauty," sets the parameters for their rendezvous strictly at his own convenience, which eliminates weekends and overnights and otherwise depends largely on his ability to deceive his live-in lover into thinking he's doing their laundry. When Harriet rebels against Paul's arrangements, he makes her feel guilty by accusing her of not "deal[ing] from strength" (112).

Marty's nature bears little resemblance to Paul's insidious personality, but, like Paul, he does have a maddeningly selfish streak that unconsciously disregards or assumes what Janie might want while rather consciously planning for what he himself wants. For example, without ever consulting Janie, he not only rents a Brooklyn

apartment for the two of them but also later makes arrangements, again without prior discussion, to move her there. Like Harriet, Janie sometimes balks at these scenarios, but, like Paul, Marty derails objections by making her feel guilty and specifically, in one case, by saying that she doesn't "love [him] enough" (139).

The first intimations of Marty's shortcomings actually occur early in the play. Although Janie doesn't openly object, she seems perplexed and uncomfortable during their first dinner-date, when he addresses her by the incredibly child-like name of "Monkey." Although she finds the endearment troubling, Janie is stirred by his affection for her, and, as a result, she fails altogether to realize the implications of what it might mean when he says, "Be sweet. I need attention. A great deal of attention" (98). As she gradually discovers, he wants more than he has a right to expect: an undivided loyalty that situates his own needs at the forefront of their relationship.

The most disquieting aspect of Marty, however, lies in the series of ultimatums that he periodically issues to motivate Janie and that Wasserstein writes in her trademark "either . . . or" formula that she recycles and re-views in The Heidi Chronicles. When Janie first hears about the Brooklyn apartment in Act 1 and seems on the edge of wavering, Marty tells her, "either you want to be with

me--you don't have to; you should just want to--or, if you don't want to, then we should just forget it." This is an obvious attempt to control not only their relationship but Janie's emotions as well, and in a response symptomatic of her vulnerability, she simply says, "No problem" (110).

Smitten though she may feel, Janie never convinces anyone that she unconditionally loves Marty, but between her family's histrionics, her own fear of loneliness, and his urge to "move forward" in their relationship (130), she takes his ultimatums seriously at first and experiences an intense desperation about making a decision. Wasserstein, in fact, quite effectively dramatizes this confluence of external pressures in the last scene of Act 1, as Janie attempts to juggle Vladimir's unexpected intrusion, her father's unannounced visit, and Marty's insistence that she prepare an old-fashioned chicken dinner just for the two of them. Despite the scene's comic effect, Janie feels frantic, and her call to Harriet for an ostensibly quick cooking lesson actually reflects her need for Harriet's support to get through a suddenly stressful situation.

As Janie slowly starts to overcome her insecurity, however, she becomes more awakened to the kind of life she will have with Marty and his ultimatums. Worried that her career will "take over" their life together, he tells Janie that unlike his friends who marry women doctors, he doesn't

want their children "brought up by strangers from the Caribbean." "I have nothing against your working," he says. "I just want to make sure we have a life" (129-30). Here, for the first time, Janie understands her future with Marty: he has the career, she might "work," and she will stay home and keep the family free of "strangers from the Caribbean."

Essentially, this scene illustrates the ramifications that can develop when even a "nice man" like Marty carves a relationship out of traditional gender roles. In this case, he not only disregards Janie's perspective but also willingly manipulates her insecurity to get what he wants. Wasserstein basically effects a materialist-feminist mode here, which, according to Sue-Ellen Case, frequently places "dramatic emphasis on the relationship between men and women and the necessity for change" (Feminism and Theater 93). In practice, Marty has been committing emotional blackmail on Janie, and it not only betrays an imbalance of power that seems natural and legitimate to him but also represents a conspicuous example of Case's--and Wasserstein's--point about "the necessity for change."

Janie, however, begins to understand that Marty will not change, and the last straw comes when he arranges to move her to his Brooklyn apartment without her consent. Angry with her demurral, he threatens Janie with a final mandate: "Either you move in with me tonight," he says, "or

we stop and I'll make alternate arrangements" (138). By then, however, the "diapers are off" (Nightingale H2). Janie has, in a sense, "grown up" (Kakutani C9) and is prepared to reject Marty's role as her parent, lover, and guru. In their last scene together, when he berates her desire to "write sketches for a giant bird at two o'clock in the morning" and challenges her "to find out what it's like to take care of yourself," Janie at last realizes that to make him happy, she will have to make herself "a monkey, [and] a sweet little girl." The life she wants "isn't right for me," says Marty. "And . . . it isn't right for you either." Telling him he's "not right" for her, however, Janie ends the relationship (138-39).

As Janie struggles toward self-determination against the demands made by both Marty and her mother, she frequently turns to longtime confidante Harriet Cornwall, whom John Simon characterizes as "her best *shiksa* friend" ("Failing" 36). According to Wasserstein's stage directions, Harriet "could be the cover girl on the best working women's magazine" (81). A Harvard MBA, Harriet wears "stylish business suit[s]" (93) to make her look, she says, "like a successful single woman" (85), one who expects to climb the corporate ladder of Colgate-Palmolive, where she has just secured a position in marketing.

Contrary to the "feminine mystique," the first impression that Harriet conveys with her intensity, "Bloomingdale's . . . poise" (Corliss 80), and career fixation is its counterpart, the "*feminist* mystique." In response to the excesses of its "feminine" alter ego, the "feminist mystique" unwittingly fostered other kinds of excess and embraced a life in the business realm, which, according to Friedan, "denied that core of women's personhood . . . fulfilled through love, nurture, home" (Second Stage 27). As a reflection of this, Harriet claims, in fact, that she doesn't "particularly want . . . to get married" (101) and views Paul Stuart and any other available man as "fine" until she's ready for or involved in the "right relationship" (103).

According to Benedict Nightingale, Harriet's "casual amours and burgeoning career in marketing both seem to proclaim the independence she enjoins on others" (H2). To bolster the image she projects to herself and others, Harriet also has accompanying feminist rhetoric, of which Janie becomes the recipient when the subject of marrying Marty is first broached. Detecting Janie's ambivalence about him, for example, Harriet says women--and by implication Janie included--don't understand that "no matter how lonely you get or how many birth announcements you receive, the trick is not to get frightened. There's nothing wrong with

being alone" (104). Janie may or may not have reached the point of being "frightened," but since she does admit that by twenty-eight she always thought she'd be married and since she also halfheartedly jokes about inseminating herself with a turkey baster, Harriet undoubtedly suspects that Janie has become alarmed by what Wasserstein calls "'all these biological time bombs going off'" (Kakutani C9). "I never respected women who didn't learn to live alone and pay their own rent," Harriet adds as reinforcement. "Imagine spending your life pretending you aren't a person. To compromise at this point would be antifeminist" (104).

But though Harriet lives and talks a life of independence and dedication to her career, she confesses to her mother that she would really like, in fact, to "have it all." According to Clive Barnes, this constitutes the central question of the play ("Funny Too" 70), and to a certain extent I agree with him. In fact, as the principal manifestation of the impact of the women's movement in Isn't It Romantic, it not only underscores Harriet's eventual actions dramatically but also plays a somewhat pertinent role in Janie's rejection of the "feminine mystique," particularly since she clearly wants to develop her "Sesame Street" prospects and to have a family life as well.

My point of departure with Barnes lies in just what to call the picture Janie craves, especially since she doesn't

quite project the kind of intensity or ambition for corporate advancement conveyed by Harriet, in particular, and associated with "having it all," in general. For Harriet, "having it all" means that a woman is able "to be married or live with a man, have a good relationship and children that you share equal responsibility for, build a career, and still read novels, play the piano, have women friends, and swim twice a week" (133). Pointing out the impossibilities of gracefully or even neurotically achieving all this, Wasserstein not-so-unrealistically quips that the "real key to 'having it all' [is] not a marriage, or a career, but a very dependable housekeeper" ("Itch" 147) and a "zillionaire . . . paying for it" (Bachelor Girls 127). The "whole notion of 'having it all' is ridiculous," she says (Betsko 422), and the "superwoman" standards that Harriet aptly summarizes don't, she insists, describe Janie's outlook (Personal Interview 1995).

What Janie wants, Janie cannot achieve through her own power, however. As Jane Eisner points out, trying to "have it all," in practice, "blocks part of what feminism is meant to bring about: systemic changes in institutions and relationships that help achieve a better balance between work and home. What have we gained," she asks, "if 'accomplished women' . . . only mimic career-obsessed men, with no time for family or community?" (E5). Although

"systemic changes" involve a political framework not found in Wasserstein's play, they undoubtedly inform Janie's unnamed frame of mind, which apparently lies somewhere between or beyond the "feminine mystique" and superwoman complex that do not quite define the kind of life she would ideally like to have.

"Having it all" does evidently meet Harriet's criteria for happiness, but what makes her blunt determination to accomplish it so intriguing is that she seems somewhat motivated by identification or competition with her mother, a near-legendary businesswoman modeled on Wasserstein's sister Sandra Meyer, herself an executive with Clark & Weinstock, management consultants (Wasserstein, "Don't Tell Mother" 196). Characterized by Mel Gussow as "a self-willed tycoon and a feminist before it was acceptable" ("New 'Romantic'" C3), Lillian is an interesting role model to Harriet, whose promotion at Colgate after only a short tenure indicates that, like her mother, she appears to be climbing the corporate ladder quickly.

Like Tasha Blumberg, Lillian is also a "formidable parent, a svelte tigress" (Nightingale H2), who hovers over Harriet's professional development as much as Tasha hovers over Janie's personal one. "Don't say fine, Harriet," she says during one encounter. "You're a Harvard MBA. I expect an analysis" (94). As Harriet's mentor and a renowned

corporate success extraordinaire, Lillian is the play's real "executive mother," so compulsively involved in her work that to fend off one of Harriet's recriminatory moods, she reminds her, "I wasn't home enough for you to blame everything on me" (132).

Yet, like Janie, Harriet seems determined to prove that a daughter's life resembles her mother's, if it does at all, only to a point. For Harriet, this emerges during the play's most pivotable commentary on trying to "have it all," during which Lillian warns Harriet that "[l]ife is a negotiation." Suggesting that her daughter's designs are impossible, she says, "[Y]ou show me the wonderful man with whom you're going to have it all. . . . You tell me who has to leave the office when the kid bumps his head on a radiator. . . . I had to make some choices," says Lillian. "I had a promising career, a child, and a husband. . . . So the first thing that had to go was pleasing my husband, because he was a grown-up and could take care of himself" (134). Harriet, however, rejects the need for "negotiation," either because she does not believe that success and single motherhood have given Lillian her self-described "full, rich life" or because she has resolved to prove that, unlike her mother, she can successfully negotiate "it all": husband, children, a career, and a social life that exceeds her mother's steady diet of "Rockford Files" reruns.

Harriet's resolution to "have it all," however, does not explain why she suddenly and unexpectedly decides two scenes after this discussion with her mother to marry a man whom even she herself admits she hardly knows. Despite her feminist rhetoric about female autonomy and having an apartment of one's own, Harriet at twenty-eight has, in fact, panicked at the prospect of being alone. "I didn't know what it would be like when Paul Stuart would leave at ten," she tells Janie. "I didn't know what it would be like to have lunch with Lillian and think I'm on my way to watching 'The Rockford Files' reruns" (143).

According to Wasserstein, Harriet's hasty leap into marriage, as well as Janie's reaction to it, is based on an incident that happened when the playwright was herself twenty-eight years old. When one of her close friends had impetuously decided to get married, says Wasserstein, she felt exactly what Janie feels when--infuriated--she tells Harriet not to "force [her]self into a situation--a marriage--because it's time" (145). "I was amazed that I was so angry," she says while recalling the incident (Personal Interview 1995).

Janie, however, experiences more than anger at Harriet's news. Having just broken her own engagement to Marty, she feels that Harriet's sudden turnabout from "learning to live alone, and women and friendship" amounts

to betrayal. "I made choices based on an idea that doesn't exist anymore," she screams at Harriet (143). Realistically, Janie's rejection of Marty results from self-growth she doesn't quite recognize yet, but her retort seems to indicate, ironically, that, although Harriet did not force her perspectives on Janie with anywhere near the same kind of coercion used by Tasha and Marty, of all of them Harriet had apparently exercised the greatest influence.

Though Janie's reaction to Harriet stems in part from the emotional bankruptcy she feels over her situation with Marty, her belief that Harriet has succumbed to certain internal and external pressures remains no less astute. Privately, Harriet might even agree with her, but Janie's onslaught nonetheless stuns her. Defending her decision against past rhetoric, she tells Janie, "I never lied to you. I lied to myself" (144). However, to justify the new approach to her life, she defensively suggests that commitment to a relationship poses a greater challenge to women than living alone.

Although this confrontation between Janie and Harriet seems to focus primarily on Harriet's insecurity and her immediate desire to "have it all" at any cost, it also targets the matter of female friendship and, more specifically, its failure to sustain mutual support during the kinds of crises women experience trying to live up to

feminist ideals. As a subsidiary issue to feminism that Wasserstein only grazes in Uncommon Women and Others, the dubious reliability of sisterhood debuts seriously in Isn't It Romantic as a painful concern to which Wasserstein returns in The Heidi Chronicles. In this case, its repercussions have a devastating effect on Janie. According to Harriet, Janie's reaction suggests either jealousy or her wanting them "to stay girls together" (144). For Janie, however, Harriet's feminist ideals underscored--philosophically, at least--the decision to abandon a future with Marty, and consequently, Harriet's betrayal of those ideals makes her advice, in general, and her alleged devotion to "women and friendship," in particular, irrevocably suspect.

In a sense, though, Harriet also feels betrayed. Janie, whom she once called "family" (107), seems like an unsupportive friend at the very moment in which she gains a promotion, finds a husband, and in short comes closer to her vision of "having it all." In her defense, however, Janie not only recognizes Harriet's engagement as an act of desperation but also realizes that, despite Harriet's desire not to end up exactly like Lillian, she probably will. As Benedict Nightingale notes, Harriet seems so "in thrall" to her mother's "control of . . . the business jungle" that her

fiance "will doubtless prove as disposable as her own father turned out to be" (H2).

Although Janie's confrontation with Harriet, like the one with Marty in the scene preceding it, indicates that she has begun to define and defend the things that matter to her, Janie doesn't recognize the extent of her metamorphosis until she finally faces off with her mother at the play's end. What precipitates Janie's proverbial last stand with Tasha is--improbably--a ridiculously undersized mink coat that the Blumbergs bring her for a gift. When Janie remarks with her customary wit that the fur would be "perfect" if she were "thirty-six and married to a doctor and a size three," Tasha makes the mistake of asking, "So why aren't you?" Provoked by her mother's insensitivity and furious at her inability to accept that she doesn't want "that life . . . right now" (148), Janie finally summons the strength to demand that the Blumbergs let her determine what she wants for herself. Though marriage and motherhood, like the fur coat, fit Tasha "perfectly," they simply do not fit Janie now and, perhaps, never will.

When Tasha finally accepts that her "daughter is a grown woman" (147), Janie lets her anger dissolve into peaceful reconciliation not only with her parents but also with herself. Unlike Harriet, Janie ultimately is not her mother, but she does acknowledge--with pride, ironically--

her mother's apparent influence in her life. "I'm Tasha's daughter," she says, and borrowing one of her mother's aphorisms, she declares her independence, stating simply, "'I am'" (151). With those words and with her solitary dance in the end, says Wasserstein, Janie has salvaged from Tasha's eccentric and sometimes overbearing repertoire the most important "gift from mother to daughter" (Betsko 425): the means, not the rules, to define herself as an autonomous woman.

By ending Isn't It Romantic with Janie and Tasha's confrontation, Wasserstein accentuates her claim that the play deals mainly with "'single women and their mothers'" (Bachelor Girls 30). While Jill Dolan notes that this motif is usually "paradigmatic . . . of cultural feminist theatre" (Spectator 9), Isn't It Romantic--if anything--reaffirms Wasserstein's more holistic approach to feminist philosophy. As a quasi-sequel to Uncommon Women and Others, in fact, it primarily adopts that play's materialist disposition regarding women's choices. After all, with or without Tasha's and Lillian's considerable influence, the story essentially concerns the struggle--by any name applicable--to "have it all," with the "important difference," says Michiko Kakutani, that Janie and Harriet are "not simply sitting around a dorm room" anymore but living their lives and fast approaching thirty (C9).

Consequently, then, the play is not so much about mothers and daughters but about two "slightly older versions of the 'Uncommon Women' who graduated from Mount Holyoke" (Gussow, "New 'Romantic'" C3). Writing as if she had left the reunion at the end of the first play to peek at their lives more closely, Wasserstein re-views and reiterates not only the same complexities faced by her earlier characters but also the increasingly problematic distress and distraction that co-opt choices and female friendships as women get older. As a follow-up to that reunion, therefore, Wasserstein further situates the challenge against the sometimes overbearing influence of mothers and others but most especially against the "feminist ideals" of autonomy, corporate success, and "having it all" which have literally and painfully brought her heroines to the play's juncture (Kakutani C9).

True to Wasserstein's creative integrity, however, Isn't It Romantic is ultimately about character and, in particular, about the emotional growth of Janie Blumberg. In short, the play's non-linear, episodically-designed scenes act like a "series of slides under a microscope" (Dolan, Spectator 107), and gradually unfold the small steps by which Janie advances from an insecure girl to the self-confident young woman who respectively rebuffs Marty, confronts Harriet, and asserts herself to Tasha in the

play's final three scenes. Having "stumbled into something [she] actually care[s] about" (130), Janie in the end rejects marriage and motherhood in favor of a potentially burgeoning career with "Sesame Street" and in the process becomes more self-empowered than Harriet.

Although that choice might belie the dominant culture's value system, Wasserstein as a liberal feminist not only defends Janie's right to her decision but also intimates in the end tableau of her "dancing beautifully, alone" (153) that Janie has perhaps made the best decision. It is at once an emotional and uplifting finale, one that perhaps owes itself, in Wasserstein's "most autobiographical play," to her admission that "'I'm the daughter who learns to dance alone'" (Finn 366).

Chapter 4

"All in This Together": Idealism, Sisterhood, and Other Dilemmas

"I thought the point was that we were all
in this together."

--closing statement of Heidi Holland's
1986 speech, "Women, Where Are We
Going?"

In terms of fem-en(act)ment, Wasserstein reaches an apex of sorts with her 1989 Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, The Heidi Chronicles. Although she returns to familiar terrain in familiar style, she evinces greater maturity as both writer and feminist by creating a "minor epic" (Stearns, "Lively, Liberated" 5D) that spans 25 years and willingly examines both the joy and--especially--the pain of feminism's impact.

According to Nina Burleigh, Wasserstein wrote The Heidi Chronicles "out of a personal sadness, a sense of being suddenly adrift herself" (1). "'I wasn't married, and I was beginning to feel like the odd man out at baby showers,'" says Wasserstein. "'I didn't know whether the sacrifices I had made were worth the road I was taking'" (Hubbard 101). Though it appears that Wasserstein may have reached a crossroads regarding career and family life, what emerges principally from this reflection is that in pursuing options that others had not pursued, she felt profoundly alienated.

In effect, this isolation and its inextricable connection to the women's movement constitute the chief concern of The Heidi Chronicles. "'I heard a lot of feminists saying they were not happy,'" recalls Wasserstein, "'and that was the impetus for this play'" (Barney 53). Specifically, it examines what happens when a "true believer" (247) commits herself to feminist ideals and then begins to feel "stranded" (232) when others--and especially, unexpectedly, other women--either do not share her views or do not provide the emotional support she had anticipated.

Chronicling Heidi's "intellectual disillusionment" (Linda Winer, "Real People" 7) is somewhat daunting, however. As Mimi Kramer notes, "Wasserstein's portrait of womanhood always remains complex" (82), but unlike that of her "uncommon women" and Janie Blumberg, Heidi Holland's "odyssey" (Hodgson 605) entails a quarter century of interrelated private and social transformations between 1965 and 1989. "I wanted to parallel a political life with a personal life," says Wasserstein, "to show how movements can influence a person's life" (Personal Interview 1995). This mission underscores the play's episodic chronology and its sometimes subtle tendency to highlight certain socio-political milestones, including, as Cathleen McGuigan notes, "key moments in baby-boomer history from the McCarthy

campaign and radical feminism to the Me Decade and the rise of the Yuppie" (76).

Because the personal and political parallel each other so closely, the play's structure invariably underscores Heidi's development by chronicling those things that contribute to it. Its "moving snapshot style of theatre," typically used--as it is here--by both Wasserstein and other feminist writers "to chronicle [women's] disillusionments and disappointments" (Kramer 82), also provides on a much larger scale the quick and quirky review of general milestones between 1965 and 1989 that demonstrate Heidi's association with the era's causes. Yet, as the play traces these and "Heidi's life from adolescence to adulthood," it eyes more pointedly, as well, an accompanying "history of the women's movement from its early days in the 1960s through the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s to the myth of the 'superwoman' who can 'have it all' in the 1980s" (Moritz 612), to--increasingly--the phenomenon of child-adoptions by single women in the 1990s. At its most complex level, in other words, the inseparable connection and episodic weaving of all these histories--personal, cultural, and feminist--set the foundation for exploring the layers of Heidi's psyche and especially her unfolding sense of alienation from within the web of multiple political realities.

Not insignificantly, The Heidi Chronicles begins with mid-60s idealism. The most evident indication of this appears in the second scene, in which Heidi and others do volunteer work for Eugene McCarthy, who launched his presidential bid in 1968 on the one premise of ending the Vietnam War. By Act 2, however, nearly all the characters have seemingly abandoned their communitarian causes for the largely self-serving "rampant careerism" typically associated with the Me Decade of the 70s and the yuppie lifestyle it engendered in the 80s (Kissel, "'Heidi' Grows Up" 35). Heidi's closest woman friend, Susan Johnston, for instance, "transforms herself" in the course of the play's 25 years "from 'sister shepherdess' on the front lines of feminism to queenpin of the movie and television industry" (Gussow, "Heffalump" C13). Heidi, however, remains at heart, if not so clearly in action, an idealist, who "clings to her values long after her more committed friends switch allegiance from communes to consuming" (Shapiro 90).

Scoop Rosenbaum is the first person to observe Heidi's idealistic nature and to forecast, as well, the disillusionment it will cause her. During the play's second scene at the McCarthy campaign rally, he tells her, "You're the one whose life this will all change significantly. . . . You'll be one of those true believers who didn't understand it was all just a phase" (172-73). Heidi, however, has what

Wasserstein calls passion (Commencement Address 1990), an uncompromising desire "to be a true believer and to live your life by something," even when others begin to vacillate or when societal values undergo a change (Rothstein 28). This committed idealism, which profoundly influences her private and socio-political ideology in general, serves as the underlying principle in understanding her eventual disillusionment with feminist friends and with feminism in general.

Although The Heidi Chronicles is, like all of Wasserstein's plays, "about choices" (Wasserstein, Personal Interview 1995), its combination of epic quality and character development changes the focus considerably. Influenced by feminist ideology, Wasserstein's earlier heroines basically sift through their professional options with varying degrees of angst and then debate whether or not they can successfully have both a career and marriage. Unlike her predecessors, however, Heidi is much more affected by the socio-political landscape of her times, feminist and otherwise. Unlike them, also, she knows at the onset what she wants to do with her life and she never considers compromising her career for marriage.

Joan Allen, who won a Tony award for her portrayal of Heidi, believes that Heidi was probably "raised in an environment where her parents told her she could be whatever

she wanted to be. It didn't matter that she was a woman'" (Rothstein 28). As proof, Heidi defies seemingly practical and "political odds" (Wasserstein, Bachelor Girls 89) and becomes a successful and self-supporting art historian who never wavers from her belief that "all people deserve to fulfill their potential" (181).

For Heidi, then, the crisis centers not so much on making choices, as it does for her predecessors, but on living with the consequences of choices made early in the play, choices inextricably bound with her eventual allegiance to feminism. She "'gets in trouble,'" says Allen, "'because basically she's not a feminist. She throws her hat into the ring of feminism, but basically she's a humanist,'" a characterization presumably culled from Heidi's own words early in the play (Rothstein 28). Allen's observation, nonetheless, is still a faulty one. Heidi gets into trouble precisely because she *is* a feminist, one whose inherent tendency toward idealism makes her not only one of feminism's true believers but also the only one of Wasserstein's heroines to make that fact absolutely clear in both theory and practice.

To appreciate the dimensions of Heidi's experiences in this work, one must understand that feminism does play a far larger role in her life than humanism. Though her political commitment to feminism does not occur until she participates

in the Ann Arbor Consciousness-raising Rap Group, Heidi in truth is a fledgling feminist from the very beginning of the play. In the first scene, for instance, when boy-crazy Susan warns Heidi that she's "going to get really messed up unless [she] learn[s] to take men seriously," Heidi--then a mere high-school student--declares that "there is absolutely no difference between you and me and him" (164). In fact, during the second scene, when Scoop meets Heidi for the first time, he immediately senses her feminist bent, which she indicates during a cynical exchange regarding 60s idealism (173):

Heidi: What if you get left behind?
Scoop: You mean if, after all the politics, you girls decide to go "hog wild," demanding equal pay, equal rights, equal orgasms?
Heidi: All people deserve to fulfill their potential.
Scoop: Absolutely.
Heidi: I mean, why should some well-educated woman waste her life making you and your children tuna-fish sandwiches?

On a subtle level, whether she knows it then or not, Heidi's schoolgirl statements--and especially that "all people deserve to fulfill their potential"--represent not humanism but liberal feminism's first principle of equality between the sexes.

Heidi's specialization as an art historian demonstrates on a rather concrete level, though, that the brief flashes of feminist rhetoric in these opening scenes are not

happenstance. To illustrate, Heidi decides in graduate school, or perhaps even beforehand, to devote her studies to "images of women from the Renaissance Madonna to the present" (180). This lifelong undertaking might initially strike her and the critics as a humanist enterprise; but in reality, like all other cultural studies of women, it eventually hinges on feminist critical practices of deconstructing earlier icons created by male artists and of reconstructing women's contributions to the field throughout its history.

Neither consciousness-raising nor humanism, however, inspires Heidi to resort to these critical practices or to become a *feminist* art historian. Her awareness of the absence of female artists in her studies does. During her slide lecture in the play's first prologue, she notes to her students that "there is no trace of [Sofonisba Anguissola], or any other woman artist prior to the twentieth century, in your current art history textbook" (160). This is an undeniably feminist, not humanist, observation. Furthermore, the text to which Heidi alludes is probably the one she donates to Peter Patrone's hospital near the play's end: H. W. Jansen's A History of Art, a classic work that Wasserstein remembers from her own undergraduate years for its omission of women (Stone 2) and that Heidi undoubtedly noted for the same reasons at Vassar and Yale.

Consciousness-raising also does not teach Heidi how to promote her career as a *feminist* art historian. Although her participation in the "Women in Art!" protest during the play's fourth scene does occur after her Ann Arbor conversion, the nature of her professional expertise would have led her, just the same, to the "Chicago Women's Art Coalition," which sponsored the demonstration. Suggested by designer Thomas Lynch and director Dan Sullivan to coincide with the Chicago Art Institute's 1974 "Age of Napoleon" exhibit in 1974 (Wasserstein, Bachelor Girls 86), the scene acts as one device among many that allows Heidi the feminist, not the humanist, to deal with "ignored or underappreciated" women artists (Lipson 12), in this case, Marie Antoinette's portraitist, Elisabeth Vigee-LeBrun. Heidi the feminist also publishes essays on "art and women" (198); becomes director of "Women's Art, a group dedicated to the recognition of American women artists" (216); receives a grant for a "small show of Lilla Cabot Perry" (223); and plays an implied role in the 1989 Georgia O'Keeffe retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In other words, Heidi's choice to become a historian of women in art is, as Karen Lipson suggests, one of the "more clever conceits of this clever play" (12), because by "depict[ing] man's exclusionist attitude toward women" (Gussow, "Heffalump" C13), it not only supplants the

humanist potential with a feminist one, but also predisposes an already predisposed Heidi toward other feminist concerns, both personal and political.

Although her early quasi-feminist rhetoric and art-history career demonstrate that Heidi's feminist disposition exists from the beginning and situates itself at the core of her character development, it does not really explain why a crisis develops. Confronted with this question, some critics tend--not without foundation--to link Heidi's dilemmas to the play's "powerful scent of autobiography" (Richards, "Life and Loves" E1) and to view her as "Wendy Wasserstein transmuted into a feminist art historian" (Simon, "Jammies Session" 66). Wasserstein does say that the play re-creates "my story" (Free Library 1995), more specifically, the "'history of me and my generation'" (Rothstein 28), and, like Heidi, she campaigned for McCarthy (Albright), participated in feminist consciousness-raising (Wasserstein, Bachelor Girls 137), and speaks of adopting a child from China or Eastern Europe (Personal Interview 1995). As her reported remarks about the impetus for writing The Heidi Chronicles powerfully attest, though, the autobiographical impulse critics seize upon evolves not so much from the kinds of borrowed circumstances in her life that liberally sprinkle her previous plays but from an emotional continuum--from the personal sadness and general

unhappiness with feminism that also inform the psychological texture and consequent conflicts of her protagonist.

To mark Heidi's crisis simply as a convolution of Wasserstein's private angst is to underplay the playwright's honest attempt to sort through the complexities of Heidi's commitment to feminism and "the expectations that were raised and then, for some reason, were just left hanging" (Rothstein 1). As Sylviane Gold observes, "Heidi buys the rhetoric of the first, heady years of feminism" (A13) only to end up questioning its direction during the play's emotional and climactic speech several scenes and 18 years later. What Wasserstein dramatizes in between is the chronicle she wants us to understand: not the fuzzy autobiographical center, but the evolution of Heidi's personal crisis within the social arena of feminism.

In reality, Heidi's problems materialize from a complicated web of intersecting conditions in the play. She is established in the plot's complex structure as an incurable idealist in an age of unenduring movements and as a closet proto-feminist with academic interests in women's affairs. Her crisis emerges when the changing tone and unfulfilled promises of the women's movement collide with both her idealism and her emotional response to consciousness-raising in the play's third scene. Except for her soliloquy at the Plaza Hotel, this is, in fact, the

play's most crucial scene, the one that pinpoints the moment at which she leaps from the personal to the political--from her private vision of feminism to the communal one. More importantly, "the way Heidi interprets it," says Wasserstein, "changes her life" (Personal Interview 1995).

As a tool for creating feminist solidarity, consciousness-raising originated with early Marxist and socialist feminisms, which recognized the need to create a forum for women to become aware of the conditions of their existence in much the same way Marx and Lenin envisioned it--as a means to raise class consciousness among the proletariat. In practice, feminist consciousness-raising, then, acts as a materialist strategy "for correcting the distortions of patriarchal ideology" (Jagger, Feminist Politics 365-66) and as a cultural strategy through which women bond together and share their experiences (Dolan 85). In Heidi's case, both strategies prove seductive, and--as interpreted by her--they forever influence how she perceives the role of men in her life and the role of female solidarity or sisterhood.

Although sisterhood becomes the pivotal ingredient of Heidi's experience in Ann Arbor, it would be wrong to underestimate the importance of men in her life. As John Simon notes, "in this examination of how women, with or without benefit of feminism, adjust to their emotional-

biological needs, men matter" ("Partial Autobiographies" 49), and in Heidi's case, there is "always an unconsummated relationship with some shadowy editor in the background" (Brustein, "Extremis" 33). These off-stage relationships routinely seem to fail because of the same either/or scenario that Marty Sterling creates for Janie Blumberg in Isn't It Romantic, not because of their irrelevance to Heidi or because of man-hating.

On the contrary, Peter Patrone remains throughout the play her closest friend and "soulmate" (Gussow, "Heffalump" C13), a homosexual who would otherwise possess "everything Heidi wants from a man" (Simon, "Partial Autobiographies" 49). However, as her decision to leave one lover rather than reject a position at Columbia University demonstrates, even in love Heidi's liberal feminism is steadfast. She simply and consistently rejects the condition of "either" choosing a career as an art historian "or" forfeiting it for a family life.

Despite some misery over her relationships with men, however, her consciousness-raising experience in Ann Arbor merely reinforces what the play's first two scenes indicate she already knows: that all "people deserve to fulfill their potential," that a well-educated woman should not have to spend her life making tuna-fish sandwiches for her husband (173), and that she deserved something better than

Scoop, a man the critics universally loathe. An "irresistibly smug cad" (Gerard, Rev. of Heidi 38) and "flippant womanizer" (Kissel, "Heidi Grows Up" 35), Scoop epitomizes a lethal mixture of charm and "horrifying selfishness" (Barnes, "Me Generation" 333). From the beginning, he "offers Heidi no choice but subjugation to his will"(Gussow, "Heffalump" C13), either as his mistress or as a "traditional wife, who stays home and stokes the embers of his ego" (Richards, "Life and Loves" E6). As Sylviane Gold observes, under the circumstances, one "can't help wondering why . . . Heidi would put up with him" (A13), but Heidi reveals the sad truth at Ann Arbor: "I keep allowing [him] to account for so much of what I think of myself. I allow him to make me feel valuable. And the bottom line is, I know that's wrong. I would tell any friend of mine that's wrong" (182).

What makes Heidi's consciousness-raising a turning point, both in her relationship with Scoop and in terms of her self-image, is not some newly-minted epiphany about her own potential, which she clearly knows she possesses, and not some spontaneous revelation that Scoop "can't cope with the challenge of dealing with an A-plus woman" (O'Connor, "A-Plus Woman" D18), but rather the realization that she's not alone. In other words, "sisterhood strikes [Heidi] as the path of the future: women supporting and celebrating one

another" in communal solidarity (Richards, "Life and Loves" E6).

When Heidi first arrives at the Rap Group with her friend Susan, though, she "sits slightly outside the circle" (176) and is consequently perceived as an "interloper" (Kramer 82) whose "inherent reserve . . . manifests itself as causticity" (Richards, "Life and Loves" E6). Deriving Heidi's uneasiness from her own first consciousness-raising session in 1970, Wasserstein recalls that one person "simplified all political stances with one sweeping agenda. According to her, 'Body hair is the last frontier,'" with the "good guys . . . on the furry side" (Bachelor Girls 137). Echoing Wasserstein's memory of this, one of the women, a 30-year-old lesbian physicist named Fran, propels Heidi's involvement with the group by drawing the battle lines: "either you shave your legs," insists Fran, "or you don't" (178,180).

What changes Heidi's initial demeanor rests specifically on the way the Ann Arbor "collective of lesbians, career women, [and] radicals" (Brustein, "Extremis" 34) deal with her and with one another. As the spokesperson against patriarchal subjugation, Fran exerts the ideological influence in the group by reminding them that "every woman in this room has been taught that the desires and dreams of her husband, her son, or her boss are

much more important than her own" (181). Although this essentially sums up the experiences of several of the women, including Heidi, Fran's words alone do not convey the "terrible sadness and insecurity all [the] brave talk barely masks" (Gerard, Rev. of Heidi 38). Jill, a 40-year-old mother of four, for instance, reveals that until recently she "had completely forgotten to take care of" herself while answering the demands of her husband and children (177). Becky, a 17-year-old whose dysfunctional parents have left her unsupervised for six months, has a live-in, abusive boyfriend. "I make all his meals, and I never disagree with him," she says. "But then he just gets angry or stoned. So . . . I lock the bathroom door and cry. But I try not to make any sound" (179).

Heidi, it appears, is touched by the way Fran and Jill respond to Becky's horrifying story. "Lamb, no one here is ever going to hate you," coos the normally abrasive Fran, while Jill, saying that women "like us have to learn to give to those who appreciate it, instead of those who expect it" (179), offers to let Becky stay with her family. Although Heidi still feels reluctant to reveal her own problems with Scoop to the others, their reactions to Becky's unhappiness form the first impression of what sisterhood could mean.

Characterizing the meeting as a way for them to "reach out" to one another as "sisters" (177), Fran wants Heidi to break her silence. Presumably reticent because of the newness of the experience and her unfamiliarity with everyone but Susan, Heidi joins the group spirit only after Susan blurts out that "Heidi is obsessed with an asshole." When Heidi declares the matter "personal," she sets the stage for the feminist rhetoric that will change her life. "'Personal' has kept us apart for so many years," says Jill. "'Personal' means I know what I'm doing is wrong, but I have so little faith in myself, I'm going to keep it a secret and go right on doing it" (180).

At this point, Fran becomes the ideological spokesperson again, this time using patriarchy to encourage positive, feminist activism. The "only way to turn [sexism] around," she says, "is for us, right here, to try to make what we want, what we desire to be, as vital as it would undoubtedly be to any man. And then we can go out there and really make a difference! . . . [But] nothing's going to change until we really start talking to each other" (181). Inspired by political possibility and the promise of sisterhood, Heidi does finally talk.

Calling Scoop a "charismatic creep" who "dates a lot of other women" and who stays "aloof" when "I need him" (181-82), she finds strength from Jill's and Fran's words and

from the compassion witnessed with Becky to admit that she has allowed Scoop to determine her self-worth. "I hope our daughters never feel like us," she says. "I hope all our daughters feel . . . worthwhile." Obviously refreshed by her confession and by the glimmer of hope she senses from her experience with the Rap Group, she asks if Fran will "promise we can accomplish that much" through the women's movement and its supportive arm of sisterhood (182). When Fran answers with a hug, Heidi's conversion is complete.

Afterwards, Susan declares their importance to one another, and, at Jill's suggestion, they join hands and begin to sing, "Friends, friends, friends / We will always be" (182-83). Switching from campfire songs to more contemporary music, they end the scene laughing together and dancing to Aretha Franklin's "Respect," thereby "re-creat[ing] the euphoric spirit of the time even as it lampoons its inane, huggy rituals" (Gold A13). For Heidi, it is an emotional catharsis, the moment in which her once-private life comes into the fold of the women's movement and into a sisterhood of feminist allies, and the moment, above all, in which her incurable idealism makes her one of feminism's true believers.

Unfortunately, however, sisterhood doesn't quite turn into what Heidi expects. According to Bette Mandl, the consciousness-raising scene "evokes the images of sisterhood

that had prevailed during what is now recognizable as a particular phase of feminism" (124). Having created it as a tongue-in-cheek send-up of 70s sensitivity groups that in hindsight seem less meaningful than they first appeared, Wasserstein probably agrees with Mandl regarding the images. In general, however, the importance of sisterhood itself to the play--and to Wasserstein--is unmistakable.

For one, she originally named The Heidi Chronicles--among other titles--The Old Girl Network (Chronicles notebook, Box 3 Folder 1) and steadfastly believes that the "signature of a truly enviable woman is the tenacity and continuity of her women friends." Nonetheless, Wasserstein in recent years has also realized, however ruefully, what Heidi does not: that although "female friendships are at all costs to be protected. . . . they generally, no matter how close, become secondary in each other's lives" and "move on" ("Beware Women" 82). The play's first clue to this is that except for Susan, the Rap Group women never again re-surface in the play or, for the most part, in Heidi's life.

Wasserstein undoubtedly suspected the inconstancy of female solidarity even in the 1970s when she wrote the reunion scene for Uncommon Women and Others. Meeting for a catch-up luncheon, the formerly close coterie of college friends have in some cases not reunited at all since graduation, and they make no plans to gather together again

anytime soon--as a support group or for more catch-up--despite the apparent restlessness they have just shared with one another. They, however, seem prepared to accept the separation. Heidi does not. More importantly, although Susan remains in her life, she ultimately disappoints Heidi more than any of the other women in the play and proves to be the most devastating setback to Heidi's sense of sisterhood.

Originally caught in the same fervor of idealism as Heidi, Susan appears in Act 1 as a McCarthy volunteer and a seemingly committed feminist, who not only introduces Heidi to consciousness-raising but also abandons life as a law clerk at the Supreme Court to live "on a Women's Health and Legal Collective in Montana" as a "radical-shepherdess-counselor" (188). Unlike Scoop, however, whose life as a "dazzling opportunist" (Simon, "Jammies Session" 68) remains for better or worse consistent throughout the play, Heidi's "chameleon friend" (Weales 574) is swept away by the materialistic spirit of the Me Decade and the age of superwoman, and by Act 2 she transforms herself "from a mountain radical to a Hollywood sharpie" (Linda Winer, "Real People" 11). Having finished business school and moved to Los Angeles "as executive VP for a new production company" (209), she tells Heidi in their last scene together that "I've been so many people, I don't know who I am" (224).

"Wild, practical, and fifty-percent rayon" (209), Susan "mutates with the times" (Richards, "Life and Loves" E6), and for that reason, says Wasserstein, "Heidi can't depend on her" (Personal Interview 1995).

Although Cathleen McGuigan believes that Susan acts "merely [as] a foil" (77) to Heidi's development, I disagree. In a play that examines disillusionment with the women's movement and, in particular, with the unfulfilled promises of sisterhood, I believe that Heidi feels betrayed by Susan in much the same way that Janie feels betrayed by Harriet in Isn't It Romantic. Like Harriet, Susan acts as her friend's arbiter of feminism. Not only does she introduce Heidi to the political component of the women's movement and to its element of sisterhood by bringing her to the Ann Arbor Consciousness-raising Rap Group, but for a period of time she also exemplifies for Heidi the meaning of total commitment to these principles by spending several years on a "feminist dude ranch" (209).

But in Act 2, Scene 3, which takes place just before the emotional speech depicting sisterhood's failure, Susan shocks Heidi by telling her, "I'm not political anymore. I mean, equal rights is one thing, equal pay is one thing, but blaming everything on being a woman is just passe." Furthermore, she says, the current generation of women doesn't "want to make the same mistakes we did" (226), to

which the stunned and confused Heidi replies, "I don't think we made such big mistakes" (227).

According to Bette Mandl, "Susan has left behind all that Heidi still believes in. She has moved into 'the system.' The sense of betrayal and abandonment Heidi feels is precisely that of someone who had counted on family loyalty, the ongoing support of sisters, above all" (124). To worsen the situation, Heidi in this scene desperately wants to confide her encroaching vulnerability and disillusionment to Susan. But Susan has other things on her mind, and does not want the conversation to be "too deep"; and although she adds that "I've been thinking a lot about you and how much I love you, and I promise I have the answer for both of us," she doesn't (224). In fact, she never truly attempts here to listen to Heidi or help her, thereby compounding the betrayal of feminism with the betrayal of their friendship.

According to John Simon, "Susan lacks Heidi's dimensions" ("Partial Autobiographies" 49). She "has just the cheerful, unapologetic bustle one finds in people who manage to get through their lives without ever reflecting on them" (Gold A13). Susan fails, consequently, to understand how seriously Heidi treats the causes they at one time shared, and though she confesses during lunch that she "miss[es] 'The Heidi Chronicles'" (227), Susan has little

insight into the influence she has unwittingly exerted on them or the role she plays in Heidi's disillusionment.

Though Susan turns out to be an unreliable sister and friend to Heidi, she nonetheless reflects her times in Act 2 and reflects, in particular, the changes in the women's movement. As a successful Hollywood executive, she has become an 80s superwoman, affluent, fashionable, businesslike, and busy, attributes that Heidi, consciously or otherwise, has largely eschewed. As such, Susan illustrates the transformation of feminism from idealism to materialism, from gathering at Rap Groups in 1970 to gathering at power showers in 1980, from demanding equal rights to consuming the dubious spoils of victory.

Although the idealistic Heidi "gets left behind" by this transformation (Gold A13), other women in the play, and especially those who attend the power shower that opens Act 2, do not (209). In terms of both structure and character development, the baby shower given for Scoop's wife acts as a counterpoint to the consciousness-raising scene. Unlike the activist women who gathered in Act 1 as a support group, Susan, Lisa Rosenbaum, her sister Denise, and their friend Betsy have little interest in honest group dynamics or in personal revelation, as their reluctance to inform Lisa of Scoop's infidelity and her reluctance to admit it demonstrate. Furthermore, most of these women are well on

their way to becoming macrocosmic superwoman who manage to have a husband, a successful career, and all the dreamed-of status symbols that accompany both.

Lisa, for instance, eventually becomes the affluent mother of two, with Scoop's considerable income as a lawyer and publisher of Boomer magazine and her salary as a prize-winning illustrator of children's books. Betsy, managing editor for Boomer, has already enrolled her unborn child in a "cram course for. . . . the SATs for nursery school" (208). Of all of them, however, Lisa's sister Denise is the one who, according to Linda Winer, especially "knows how to have it all" ("Real People" 11). "[O]nce my career's in place," says Denise, "I definitely want to have my children before I'm thirty. I mean, isn't that what you guys fought for? So we could 'have it all'" (211). Denise eventually does exactly what she predicts. Graduating from production assistant for "Hello, New York," a television program hosted by another "superwoman," April Lambert, to story editor at Susan's Hollywood studio, she marries, becomes a mother, and plans for her girls "to get married in their twenties, have their first baby by thirty, and make a pot of money" (226). In all, says Joan Allen, "'it's just a world [Heidi] can't relate to'" (Rothstein 28)

Although, as Cathleen McGuigan points out, these women seem more like caricatures than real persons (77), as

devices they represent not only Wasserstein's "picture of women who want [to have] it all" (Gussow, "Heffalump" C13) but also the "co-opting of feminist politics" (McGuigan 76) in which Heidi's dream about fulfilling potential turns into stifling standards of success or, worse, into "greedy narcissism" (Gold A13). More importantly, Heidi--unmarried, childless, idealistic, and not materialistic--can neither expect nor feel the spirit of sisterhood with them, and because "'there's no group to include herself in'" (Rothstein 28), she comes to feel stranded.

According to Nina Burleigh, the "idea of 'having it all' is distasteful to Wasserstein" (8), a point the playwright underscored during an interview with Cathleen McGuigan when she wondered if "'the purpose of all this [was] so that 21-year-old girls can get M.B.A.'s'" (77). Although she recycles the theme of having it all from Isn't It Romantic, Wasserstein nevertheless stresses that it "'really isn't the point of the play. The point of the play is when Peter . . . says to Heidi, 'You know, our friends are our family.' . . . [It's] about a generation, about people whose friends are their family, and who never connected the way they thought they would'" (Burleigh 8). This specifically reveals itself in the play as failed sisterhood, which in Heidi's case is as much a fallout of

the narcissism associated with having it all as it is a fallout of her own--and Wasserstein's--idealism.

Heidi's alienation reaches a climax during her long speech, "Women, Where Are We Going," which according to Wasserstein is "'probably the kernel of the play'" (Rothstein 28). Characterized by David Patrick Stearns as a "nervous breakdown . . . address on feminism" ("Lively, Liberated" 5D), it reflects Wasserstein's original inspiration for creating The Heidi Chronicles. "'I wrote this play,'" she says, "'because I had this image of a woman standing up at a women's meeting saying, 'I've never been so unhappy in my life,'" a feeling she acknowledges to have experienced "'in me and in others'" (Shapiro 90) and one that culminates for Heidi in a dramatic "cry of despair" (Weales 574).

The speech begins as a comic tour de force of what it means to be an "exemplary" and "exhausted" superwoman who does it all (229). Unprepared to give a formal speech, Heidi cites as her excuse a busy schedule from the previous day during which she taught classes, attended aerobics, picked up her children after school, prepared a gourmet meal, terminated an illicit affair, "finished writing ten pages of a new book," helped to feed the homeless, and "relieved any fears that [her banker husband] 'might' be getting old by 'doing it' in the kitchen" (229). The

breathless spiel acts as a humorous treatment--or, more pointedly, as a satiric ridicule--of superwoman's impossible standards.

Midway through her speech, she begins to imagine the lives of seven women who attended a recent exercise class with her. In some respects, each one denotes an individual aspect of her superwoman model, but on the whole they seem to represent what Wasserstein presumably views as a cross-section of middle-class women: two young mothers "heatedly debating the [nursery school] reading program," one "woman [Heidi's] mother's age," one socialite with "perfect red nails," a "naked gray-haired woman extolling the virtues of brown rice and women's fiction," and "two twenty-seven-year-old hotshots" who "pulled out their alligator datebooks and began madly to call the office" (229-30).

Most likely, Heidi had long ago concluded how little she had in common with these women, but on this particular occasion she experiences an unbearable discomfort and alienation that snaps into the open when she drops the contents of her bag in the locker room. Feeling both "'worthless'" and "'superior'" to these seven women, she tells the Plaza Hotel audience, "I'm embarrassed--no, humiliated--in front of every woman in that room. I'm envying women I don't even know. I'm envying women I don't even like" (231). In short, Heidi is acknowledging that she

"is a woman alone" (Shapiro 92). She "'wants to be included in the group,'" says Joan Allen, but she "'can't find any peace or comfort in relating to any of them'" (Rothstein 28), and to make matters worse, she also suspects that they don't like her. "I'm sure the mothers . . . think women like me chose the wrong road," says Heidi, that "'it's a pity they made such a mistake, that empty generation'" (231).

The virtual absence of men in this speech highlights the fact that they have less to do with Heidi's anguish than her sisters, and, unfortunately, by the time Heidi delivers her talk, the women in the locker room are merely bit players in the growing list of those who have entered her life and left her blank. She has long ago lost contact with the women from the Rap Group, and she cannot depend on the mutual support and interest of Susan and her power-shower counterparts. Abandoned, therefore, by their "settling-for or . . . selling-out" (Leonard 70), Heidi feels saddened and "betrayed by her contemporaries"--by their materialism, by their forsaken friendship, and especially by the perception that they "have lost all touch with feminist values"--and, as a result, she "has a meltdown" (Gerard, Rev. of Heidi 38): "I don't blame the ladies in the locker room for how I feel. I don't blame any of us. . . . It's just that I feel stranded. And I thought that the whole point was that we

wouldn't feel stranded. I thought the point was that we were all in this together" (232).

According to Laurie Winer, Heidi's speech seems paradoxically to suggest not only that she has "failed herself in some profound way" but also that she feels "more blameful, than guilty" (C16). During a particularly reflective moment in Bachelor Girls, Wasserstein writes that the "self-recrimination for not being a certain kind of woman, a certain kind of mother, a certain kind of complete person is a quiet but constant undertow, a persistent dull ache" (148). By feeling worthless beside the women in the locker room, Heidi is largely internalizing her failures and thus experiencing the kind of self-recrimination that Wasserstein herself has apparently endured. Heidi, however, also senses that the ladies of the locker room don't approve of her, and when external forces--especially, other women--project their disapproval for not being that certain kind of woman or mother, Wasserstein, like Heidi, becomes understandably resentful. "'Are they saying that women who decided to fulfill their potential have made a mistake? That's completely unfair,'" she says. "'It makes you feel stranded. It makes you feel part of a tidal wave'" (Rothstein 28).

In echoing Heidi's line about feeling stranded, Wasserstein not only names the play's crisis but also

implies that the most blameful source of Heidi's alienation is disintegrated sisterhood. "'If we were all in this together, why does it feel so separate now?'" asks Wasserstein. Feminism, she says, made options available to women that previous generations could not imagine. "'But that's the personal pursuit. That is not the 'We' . . . What's missing is the 'We''" (Rothstein 28).

For many, the problem of sisterhood, especially as Wasserstein presents it in this play, raises several questions. In "Feminism, Postmodernism, and The Heidi Chronicles," for instance, Bette Mandl writes that any dream of commonality and "the unitary picture of 'woman' it evokes, have been shown to resemble the totalizing patriarchal visions they hoped to displace" (121). Applied to Wasserstein, the "unitary picture" is the unifying spirit of sisterhood that she and Heidi not only idealize but expect others to practice, a position that Helene Keyssar deems "aggressively monologic" (97). As Kathleen P. Jones notes, the "kind of commitment that is expected from a sister exacts a toll that is not always consistent with the feminist stress on autonomy and self-development" (808). Expecting universal conformity to sisterhood may be a monolithic point of view, in which case Heidi--and Wasserstein--expect more from women than they have a right to expect.

A second issue involves Heidi herself. According to Laurie Winer, the "person who has let Heidi down is none other than Heidi herself." Although Winer believes that one "is not made unhappy by sticking close to her values in life, even as others fall by the wayside" (C16), she also suggests that Heidi's "ungenerous trait of sitting in judgment" (C13) makes her no more reliable a "sister" than those who have failed to support her.

During her speech, for instance, Heidi makes it clear that she feels left out by the women in the locker room, but at the same time she also exhibits what Winer characterizes as a "need to condemn" (Winer C13). "I'm sure the woman with the son at Harvard is miserable to her daughter-in-law," says Heidi near the end of her speech. "I'm sure the gray-haired woman is having a bisexual relationship with a female dockworker and driving her husband crazy. I'm sure the hotshots have screwed a lot of thirty-five-year-old women, my classmates even, out of jobs, raises, and husbands" (231). In truth, she barely masks her condescension, which is especially evident during the women's discussion about the benefits of certain designer sneakers--not a terribly uncommon topic of conversation for an aerobics class but one Heidi finds so impossibly shallow that "at this point," she says, "I decided I would slip out and take my place in the back row of the class" (230).

According to Winer, rhetoric such as this, which Heidi also employs with more comic effects about the "blandish" Lisa Rosenbaum (202), "soon enough reveals [Heidi's] own bias" against women who are not like her (C16), a point that impugns her own despair about feeling stranded. One might argue that Heidi's comments reflect her growing disillusionment with the increasingly gilded values she perceives in the women she knows, but in truth her remarks still intimate the kind of selective sisterhood Janie Blumberg evinces when Harriet announces her engagement and Janie seems not just unsupportive, but mean.

Even the uncontrollably jaded Susan also hints that Heidi is not always there for her. "Heidi will drop anything . . . even a chance to see me," she says at consciousness-raising, just to spend time with the maddeningly unfaithful Scoop (181). Years later Susan likewise notes that with Heidi in London, she had to depend on others to smooth her transition to New York. Although Heidi's career rationally explains her absence in Susan's life at the time, Heidi is unable, it seems, to accept the similar demands of Susan's career not too long afterwards. In terms of female friendship, in other words, not only could Heidi probably act like a better friend herself, but there is also, finally, this to consider: the value of

sisterhood notwithstanding, Heidi's best friend in this play is not Susan or any other woman. It is Peter Patrone.

The final issue--and the most controversial--is that many critics regard Heidi's disillusionment as evidence that The Heidi Chronicles stands as an "indictment of the failure of the women's movement" (Laurie Winer C16). According to John Beaufort, for instance, although "Wasserstein dramatizes the ways in which Heidi and her liberated sisters have made use of their newfound, hard-won freedom," the play also demonstrates that Heidi's increasing isolation and sadness correlate directly with "the losses in idealism and selfless dedication that have accompanied the gains of the women's movement" ("Bright Facades" 24).

At the heart of this failure, says David Patrick Stearns, is that the "feminist ideals of the 1960s fade[d] into the greed of the 80s" and into a liberation that ultimately became "empty" when it abandoned its communal spirit for "self-glorification" ("Lively, Liberated" 5D). More specifically, says Beaufort, once they "triumphed in their battles 'to be me,' the friends of the encounter sessions seem to have forgotten the ideals they once cherished, and concentrated instead on advancing their careers and realizing their personal ambitions" ("Bright Facades" 24). As an incurable idealist, however, Heidi committed herself to feminist ideals, and having lost the

support she had counted on, she tells Peter near the play's end that she doesn't "have a life . . . that works" for her (235). Rather than "an advocate of the women's movement," then, she seems more like "one of its victims" (Kramer 81).

Much to the chagrin of Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, both Heidi and Wasserstein act, therefore, as "spokeswomen for a feminism that failed, that left women like Heidi 'stranded.'" With that word, claim Hart and Phelan, Heidi answers her speech on "Women, Where Are We Going" with "'Nowhere,'" a conclusion that they argue, however, indicts not feminism, but the limitations of Wasserstein's "monolithic" feminist vision (2-3). Like Hart and Phelan, Corinne Robins feels "horrified" and "angry" at Wasserstein and at the play's alleged imputation of the women's movement. Stating that feminism "is presented as at best a quaint but somewhat dangerous aberration of the recent past," Robins denounces the "betrayals of the Wendy Wassersteins . . . who while profiting from the movement have set out to undermine it" (4).

Wasserstein vehemently denies that The Heidi Chronicles represents any ultimate statement on feminism, let alone an indictment of it (Elder 29). "'I don't look back on feminism with anger,'" she says with exasperation. "'I'm a feminist. . . . I think the fight for equality isn't over'" (Christy 10). According to Linda Winer, the play simply

"dares to ask the hard questions" about the women's movement, an observation with which I agree ("Real People" 7). For example, although Heidi's inherent idealism to causes feminist and otherwise exacerbates the eventual isolation she never anticipated, her alienation is very profound and raw, almost too private for public reflection. But Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Stacey point out that "denying the existence of a problem some have designated as the feminization of loneliness will only privatize the pain" (348), a condition Wasserstein rejects and bravely "dares" to explore through Heidi's speech.

The Heidi Chronicles also dares to probe the relationship of the women's movement to societal models of success and consumerism. To some extent, in fact, Wasserstein would agree with Robert Brustein's wry observation that she "seems to suggest that the feminist movement . . . has succeeded largely in introducing women to the ravaging competitiveness of the 80s . . . [and in] adapting women to the worst qualities of men." Although to me this results more in a "subterranean assault" on the "yuppie standard" than an indictment of feminism ("Extremis" 34), Wasserstein "has a strong point to make about lost values" (McGuigan 77). In short, she dares to question the misguided opportunism that has overshadowed feminism's agenda of reform and female community.

"What distresses [Wasserstein]," then, says Nina Burleigh, "is the way things have turned out, the way the old solidarity has collapsed into the new individualism" (8). However, as Paula Span notes, "neither Heidi nor Wasserstein would repudiate the movement" (G7). For certain, at the end of the play, when Scoop says to Heidi, "So I was right all along. You were a true believer," Heidi responds, "I don't see how it could be any other way" (247). Wasserstein devotedly remains a true believer, too, says Span (G7), while Heidi, concludes Brustein, "will no doubt continue to battle on behalf of her sex for equal rights and recognition" ("Extremis" 34).

Although Wasserstein clearly, then, does not renounce the women's movement, what continues to fuel this controversy and extend it well beyond the failure of sisterhood is the revelation in the last scene that Heidi has adopted a baby girl. According to Sharon Elder, some critics--among them, feminist critics--regard Heidi's "almost palpable happiness" in the last scene as the most blatant instance altogether of "Wasserstein's indictment of the movement. The message, they claim, is that if women had just stayed home in the first place to have babies, they wouldn't now be so frustrated, lonely, overwhelmed, and exhausted" (29). Although Elder, perhaps, distorts the gist

of critical response to the message, hardly anyone, it seems, can justify Wasserstein's ending.

In the first place, as Bette Mandl legitimately argues, "Wasserstein has not . . . prepared the audience for this unexpected turn of events" (125). Though Corinne Robins contends that the play's fertility discussions, multiple pregnancies, baby shower, and Peter's role as a pediatrician prove that the "subtext of The Heidi Chronicles . . . is children" (4), these matters highlight the lives of other characters, not Heidi, and they especially offer no clue that she herself might consider adopting a child. Interestingly, as archival materials show, Wasserstein originally intended in the scene preceding the last one for Heidi to tell Peter that she wanted a child. Indecisive about how to proceed from there, Wasserstein shows in one scenario that Heidi asks Peter's help for an adoption (Chronicles notebook, Box 3 Folder 4) and, in another, that she considers talking "about children" to Fran, now a midwife living in Minnesota, where Heidi says she plans to teach at Carleton College (Chronicles ms., Box 4 Folder 8). Wasserstein deleted these adoption references, she says, because the "more important thread in Heidi's scene with Peter was that Stanley was ill," adding that "you also have to cut through time or the play drags" (Personal Interview 1995). By leaving out any suggestion whatsoever about

adoption, though, it seems to many like an "unmotivated conclusion" (Matuz 218), one merely "tacked on" to bring the play to its conclusion (Kissel, "'Heidi' Grows Up" 35).

With little insight into or justification for Heidi's decision, therefore, critics have savaged the last scene not only for its unexpectedness but also for its implications. Sylviane Gold, for example, argues that with her adoption, Heidi's "sense of sadness and betrayal is assuaged by proxy, as it were" (A13). This perspective suggests that the baby is a "glib solution" (Simon, "Partial Autobiographies" 49), one aimed to provide for Heidi either "a cure for the mopes" (Leonard 70) or the impression of "selfless fulfillment" (Gussow, "Heffalump" C13). However, as Gerald Weales points out, "why single parenthood should fill the vacuum in her life is never clear in the script" (574), especially since the play contains only one unconvincing and vague statement from her about wanting a family (211).

According to Elder, having a child is "emphatically not Wasserstein's prescription for solving the mid-life blues of single career women" (29). "'Heidi doesn't say that the baby is the answer,'" contends Wasserstein (Span G7). Heidi also doesn't say that "her generation was sacrificed to the women's movement and that female fulfillment must come through babies" (Hubbard 106). Heidi, insists Wasserstein, simply "'makes a life for herself'" (Span G7). "It's

something that a lot of single women my age are doing" (Personal Interview 1995), she says, and though "'very demanding,'" it also "'add[s] so many dimensions'" (Barney 54).

From a feminist standpoint, however, this position leads to another impasse. According to Nina Burleigh, several "prominent women--Betty Friedan and Helen Gurley Brown among them--have criticized the play's ending . . . [as a] false solution to a false dilemma . . . having to choose between a career and having a family" (Burleigh 1). The real dilemma, say many feminists, is that society, in continuing to regard women as its primary caretakers, still does little to ease the burden of choices that men, on the other hand, can make without forethought or recrimination. Friedan, in particular, says that she was disturbed by the ending because in "'depicting Heidi as troubled over career and family, Wendy Wasserstein inadvertently fed a media hype, a new feminine mystique about the either/or choices in a woman's life'" (Burleigh 1). Along these lines, Heidi's decision seems, in fact, like a hybrid of "having it all," one that simulates the prescription Lillian Cornwall makes to Harriet in Isn't It Romantic to have a child and pursue a career while dispensing with marriage.

To offset all the caviling that the play's conclusion seems on many levels like a "cop out" (Gold A13), I prefer

to see Heidi's adoption mainly as a device, one that allows the perennially idealistic Heidi to envision the future. This approach materializes as Scoop asks her during the final scene if she is happy. "Well, I have a daughter," responds Heidi, "[and] there's a chance, just a millionth, that Pierre Rosenbaum and Judy Holland will meet. . . . And he'll never tell her it's either/or, baby. And she'll never think she's worthless unless he lets her have it all. And maybe, just maybe, things will be a little better. And, yes, that does make me happy" (246-47).

As this short speech indicates, Heidi and her adoption--and the reasons for her adoption--are not the real focus of the play's conclusion. Judy is. As Bette Mandl muses, Heidi's "hope of a better future for Judy [could] be framed as a feminist vision of possibility" (126). Inextricably bound to her own experiences, Heidi's closing lines about either/or echo Scoop's ultimatum to her at the end of Act 1, and when she rejects it then as "simply not true," he tells her, "that's why you 'quality time' girls are going to be one generation of disappointed women" (202). In the future that Heidi imagines for her daughter, however, Scoop's son will never say these words to Judy. In the future that Heidi imagines, Judy will never think she's worthless unless Pierre lets her have it all, a declaration reminiscent of what she said in Ann Arbor nearly twenty

years earlier about their daughters feeling worthwhile (182). Heidi wishes, in other words, for what narrowly missed her own lifetime: feminist idealism becoming society's reality, and a future in which Judy can fulfill her potential without recrimination and thus become, in Wasserstein's framework of mothers and daughters, a woman who is "[not] her mother."

Judy, then, represents--in Heidi's words--a "heroine for the twenty-first" century (248). In a play that examines the impact of the women's movement and dares to ask questions, Heidi's adoption says, perhaps, that "the next generation will make the connections" she didn't (Richards, "Life and Loves" E6). In this way, the adoption is a fitting conclusion, one that not only gives credence to Heidi's lifelong commitment as a "true believer," but also places Heidi's personal and political involvements in feminism in the context of the future and justifies the ongoing work of the women's movement despite failure or setbacks.

The play ends with a "slide of Heidi triumphantly holding Judy in front of a museum banner for a Georgia O'Keefe [sic] retrospective" (249), an exhibit that did in fact take place at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1988-1989. On one level, this last display represents a professional triumph and grand finale for Heidi. In the

dramatic world, it suggests that Heidi herself, after years of crusading for the need to highlight the achievements of women artists, has finally succeeded in doing so. On another level, however, an image of women past, present, and future emerges. If, as Wasserstein says, The Heidi Chronicles represents "'a play of ideas'" (Shapiro 92), the last idea conveyed by this image is not an indictment of feminism or of its leaky solidarity but on the contrary a celebration of its unfinished work and its intergenerational alliances.

Chapter 5

Of Life and Men

Tessie, as your Aunt Pfeni can tell you,
a good man is hard to find.

--Gorgeous Teitelbaum in The Sisters
Rosensweig

I didn't have a "you" in my life at sixteen.
I'm certainly not going to have a "you"
in my life now.

--Sara Goode to Merv Kant in The Sisters
Rosensweig

It's either/or.

--Scoop Rosenbaum to Heidi Holland in
The Heidi Chronicles

On many levels, The Sisters Rosensweig represents a departure for Wasserstein. Tightening her time frame to a single weekend, she abandons her trademark episodic style for a more traditionally unified structure, and though she continues to examine the profound effects of the women's movement on private life, she nonetheless renders its overt politics and rhetoric to subtle suggestion. Of all the differences, however, the most significant involves character development: her uncommon women--formerly college students, college graduates, and thirtysomethings--have reached the heretofore uncharted passage of middle age.

It "'was important to me to write a play about three uncommon women who are not 23,'" says Wasserstein (Miller H1). "'The fact of the matter is: three middle-aged women

on a stage who are accomplished and successful and not caricatures in our culture is still a surprise. . . . And that's why I wanted to write this play'" (Miller H8). Although Alison Lurie pursued a similar mission with her 1984 Pulitzer Prize novel, Foreign Affairs, few writers have ventured into the scantily examined territory of women's life after forty, and when they have, notes Paul Hodgins, the characters "are frequently ghettoized . . . [and] sketchily drawn as harridans, mindless ditherers, nags or dangerously unbalanced Medeas" (Hodgins, "Southern California" 8).

In Wasserstein's play, the three Rosensweig sisters are portrayed instead as thoughtful, middle-aged women who have reached crossroads in their lives. Like their counterparts in The Three Sisters, which Wasserstein says she loosely imitates, the Rosensweigs "need to find Chekhov's Moscow of the spirit, to find their place in the world" (Barnes, "Wendy's Wonderful" 24), and though they share with her earlier heroines a concern about their present and future, they are by virtue of their more mature years the first to begin seriously "asking themselves significant questions about their past" (Richards, "School of Life" H5). As Lee Barney notes, in "her own way, each sister in the play struggles with identity crises, trying to rationalize the choices she has made in her life" (51). The result is a

middle-aged vision with a feminist slant, and though it links a number of identity issues "about being American, Jewish, and woman" (Wasserstein, Free Library 1995), the play pointedly raises the question as well of how uncommon women make room in their uncommon lives for loving, sustained relationships with men.

Although critics have analyzed the Jewish element most extensively, it acts more for me as a sparring partner, so to speak, for Wasserstein's retrospective and feminist objectives, especially as it affects the relationship between past and present in the life of the eldest sister, Sara Goode. Like Wasserstein, the Rosensweigs grew up in a traditional Jewish family in Brooklyn (Burleigh 8), but for reasons never made quite clear in the play, Sara views her background as a symptom of old-world values or as a liability to her international business affairs, and, consequently, she "aggressively nullifies her New York Jewish upbringing" (Stuart 63). In fact, says Lee Barney, "with her fake British accent, chintz-filled house and snobby beau, [she] has done everything short of converting to repudiate her Jewish roots in Brooklyn" (51).

Sara's "WASP Disneyland" in London becomes disrupted with the arrival of sister Gorgeous Teitelbaum, who "much to Sara's horror . . . wears her Brooklyn-Jewish roots on her frilly pink sleeves" (Stuart 77). As "the only halfway

devout Jew" of the Rosensweigs (Watt, "Drawing-Room" 77), Gorgeous induces Sara's quick ire during the first act when shortly before the arrival of dinner guests she insists on some semblance of Sabbath observance by lighting candles and reciting a brief prayer. A quintessential yenta (Kissel, "Sharpened 'Sisters'" 74) to whom "'sisterhood is powerful' suggests Hadassah" (Linda Winer, "'Sisters'" 76), Gorgeous represents everything Sara has rejected.

On her own, Gorgeous has neither the resources nor the acumen to force Sara's showdown with their Jewish past. However, as Jan Stuart observes, Gorgeous' "in-your-face ethnicity is multiplied by the arrival of Mervyn Kant" (77), a faux furrier who is traveling in Europe with the American Jewish Congress and who "sifts all discourse through his Jewish identity" (Linda Winer, "'Sisters'" 76). Because, as Sara notes, he "always come[s] back" to his roots (54), she thinks not only that Merv has a "narrow perspective" (53) but also that he judges her as someone who has "'assimilated beyond her wildest dreams, and now . . . wants to come home,'" an assumption she denies (57).

Although the question of Jewish identity creates considerable tension between Merv and Sara, it quickly metamorphoses into sexual tension. After "a somewhat quickie" on the night they meet (Watt, "Drawing-Room" 77), Sara the next day rebuffs any possibility of a future

together. Not only does she find Merv's Jewish world "very different" from hers, but she also scoffs at his attempt to become her "knight in shining armor" (81). "I didn't have a 'you' in my life at sixteen," she says. "I'm certainly not going to have a 'you' in my life now" (82). For me, this exchange clearly illustrates that, as Sara's foil, Merv turns the play's Jewish factor into a sparring partner for its feminist factor, because despite his formidable Jewish rhetoric and identity, Merv's presence in the play ultimately contributes more to its reflections about Sara's relationships with men.

By the end of the play, the conflict generated by the Jewish element acting on the feminist one concludes with a cease-fire on both counts. Once she realizes that "however hard she has worked, Jewish identity is not discardable," Sara comes to terms somewhat with her past and abandons the hard-line assimilation by lovingly reciting "her given name, the ever-so-Jewish Rosensweig" (Kissel, "Sharpened 'Sisters'" 74). At the same time, Sara also admits--grudgingly--that she likes the "sweet, loudmouthed furrier" after all (Kirkpatrick A11). Nonetheless, she tells him, "I don't think about us getting married, and I don't even need to get our children together" (105). Consequently, as these lines reveal, the cease-fire, however warm and affectionate, has a hedging tone. It not only says that Sara relishes her

independence, but it also suggests, however faintly, a residue from troubled relationships in her past, an impasse that represents for me an underlying shadow that Wasserstein wants to cast over this play.

Although Sara's relationship with Merv epitomizes Wasserstein's use of Jewish culture as an accessory to her feminist objectives, she integrates the two in other ways as well. While working on The Heidi Chronicles, Wasserstein says she "deliberately didn't write Heidi as Jewish because of what happened to me in Miami" (Personal Interview 1995). An "autobiographical musical comedy [that] never got beyond a workshop production in 1986" (Miller H8), Miami followed Wasserstein's other "Jewish" play, Isn't It Romantic, and folded in part, she says, because "they said it was too Jewish." In fact, because "it's about women, it's comedy, and it's Jewish," Wasserstein believes that critics and producers alike treat her work sometimes with a "triple whammy" (Personal Interview 1995). "'Nobody in Hollywood says, oh, boy--let's do a play about a 54-year-old woman . . . who still has possibilities,'" let alone one whose last name is Rosensweig (Miller H8). It seems, therefore, that she deliberately showcases all three in The Sisters Rosensweig, merging the Jewish component with a feminist one, and--a la fem-en(act)ment--gives both the play itself and the act of writing it a political agenda.

In addition to these motivations, Wasserstein at the same time wanted the play "deliberately set on the eve of a momentous historical event" (Rosensweig ix), specifically that "August weekend of 1991 when the Soviet Union was teetering on the revolution that was to turn it back into Russia" (Barnes, "'Sisters'" 72). As The Heidi Chronicles demonstrates, setting plays within historic frameworks is one of Wasserstein's cyclic passions. "In a way," she says, "what I do is a lot like British theatre. It's a large canvas in which you see the social and historical change, and then the personal change, and how they reflect in each other" (Stone 2).

For The Sisters Rosensweig, setting the play expressly during the break-up of the Soviet Union provides both a creative and logical rationale to her would-be detractors for its being "steeped in Jewish culture" (Gussow, "Comedy" C3). As Clive Barnes explains, the dismantling of the Russian republic created an atmosphere in real and stage life "for ethnic reassessment. Certainly a time to think about anti-Semitism and what it has meant to the makeup of the world still at large" ("Wendy's Wonderful" 24). In this vein, Tessie Goode's school project about her mother's past, her short-lived intention to join the Lithuanian resistance with her "dimwitted boyfriend" Tom Valiunus (Richards, "School of Life" H6), and her desire to know more about the

roots of her ethnic identity have a historical frame of reference, one that also accounts for Sara's own reflections and justifies Merv's "acutely sensitized radar for anti-Semitism" (Stuart 77).

Although the dissolution of the Soviet Union has a clear relationship to Jewish identity, it stands more for me as an inventive way to link Jewish politics with feminist intent. For one, the Soviet disintegration underscores the focus on what it means to feel uncertain and unsettled. As Phoebe Hoban points out, "the sisters Rosensweig are in search of themselves, trying to find a sense of centeredness in a world that is out of control" (34). To emphasize the milieu of chaos further, therefore, Wasserstein's socio-political repertoire not only includes anti-Semitism but also skirts the edges of "AIDS, bisexuality, teenage rebellion," economic recession, and unemployment (Greene 33). In other words, the disintegration and bifurcation of social institutions complement the play's true nucleus: the personal disintegration and renewal of Sara, Gorgeous, and Pfeni, the core of which contains an inseparable, feminist disposition.

In retrospect, therefore, Sara's final words to Merv--suggesting romance, but forbidding commitment--reflect this disposition. When she declares her infatuation with him during their last scene together, says Howard Stein, she

makes "her position clear: I don't want you to be the answer for me. And she means it" (25). Burned twice by failed marriages, Sara has learned, I suspect, that, despite her down mood right now, an emotional commitment to Merv won't work. This conclusion merely reinforces what Wasserstein has quietly been tracking: specifically, that at the heart of the play's individual crises and feminist dialectic lies the uneasy relationship between a woman's career and her private life.

Tracing their lineage to Uncommon Women and Others, so to speak, the three uncommon sisters represent a "provocative slide rule of identity in today's achievement arena" (Kraft B7). As the brilliant managing director of the Hong Kong/Shanghai Bank, Sara has appeared "on the cover of Fortune twice" (10). Pfeni, a travel columnist, has previously published international, Margaret Mead-like studies of women and culture, and Gorgeous awaits a cable-television deal for her Boston radio show. However, says Lee Barney, despite "their apparent success, the sisters in Wasserstein's play seem painfully lonely" (50) or, at the very least, filled with what Wasserstein calls yearning and melancholy (Grossberg D1).

Although Gorgeous seems less troubled than her sisters until she reveals a few secrets at the close, Sara and Pfeni are noticeably "roiling with discontent" (Stuart 63). Sara

describes herself at the onset, for instance, as a lonely and bitter woman (12), who, according to her daughter, has "desperate need of hope and rebirth" (7). Pfeni, on the other hand, seems inexplicably unable to leave her somewhat unsatisfying job despite being "full of restless yearnings" to trek to Tajikistan and finish a book on gender and class (Kissel, "Family Circus" 47).

As "compulsive achievers" (Henry, "Reborn" 69), Sara and Pfeni illustrate how well-educated women have become enormously successful beneficiaries of the liberal feminist agenda to make myriad careers available to women. Yet, because they seem "vaguely maladjusted" (Richards, "School of Life" H5), critics have accused Wasserstein--again--of indicting the women's movement or have used her heroines' unhappiness as a vehicle to indict the movement themselves. "Options flourish," says Howard Stein, for instance. "But in the final analysis, they offer neither solace nor refuge for the condition that life is wanting" (22).

Agreeing with Stein's assessment, David Patrick Stearns says that Wasserstein has undoubtedly "upset her feminist supporters" with this play, especially since the "two who have pursued glamorous careers . . . realize they're neurotic, lonely and painfully estranged" ("Sisters'" 4D). In this vein, according to Linda Winer, The Sisters Rosensweig hardly seems like "the direction some of us

desired for the woman who broke mainstream barriers with The Heidi Chronicles" ("Sisters'" 76). To complicate matters, critics also conclude that Wasserstein has apparently agreed that "it's all worthless if she ain't got a good husband to come home to--as, we ultimately learn, none of the Rosensweig girls has" (Feingold 84).

Although this conclusion illustrates an astonishingly hasty and inaccurate rush to judgment by the critics, it is not difficult to see why a less-informed audience might leave The Sisters Rosensweig with this impression. On the surface, all three of them seem to act at times as though the absence of men--or of reliable men--in their lives lies at the root of whatever discontent each experiences in the play. "I miss sex. I always liked sex," Sara tells Merv (58), and though she erects a few barriers around the expected continuation of their relationship, the fact remains that it takes a mere 48 hours to become smitten with him. At the same time, apparently for the convenience of male companionship, she dates Nicholas Pym, a "pompous English prig" she doesn't particularly like (Barnes, "Wendy's Wonderful" 24). His longtime presence in Sara's life makes her self-characterized loneliness particularly convincing, in fact, since he proves himself not only an incredible bore but also, according to Tessie, a "socially acceptable, racist, sexist" male who wines and dines

sixteen-year-old models on the sly (10), all of which provokes Gorgeous to name him "a philanderer and a Nazi" (34).

In the meantime, the never-married Pfeni has for the last three years engaged in an insecure relationship with an "internationally renowned director and bisexual" (17), Geoffrey Duncan, who she steadily worries might someday leave her--as he eventually does--because he misses men. Before he departs, however, she seems clearly willing during the second act to end her fabulous career for him, declaring "I'm not going to travel anymore. I want to stay with you" (69); and when he does exit her life, she--momentarily, at least--falls apart.

Gorgeous, the only married one of the three, reveals that her husband's firm has dissolved its partnership, leaving him unemployed as a lawyer for the past two years. Henry is not "even looking for a job," she says, but worse than that, he "dresses up in a trench coat and goes out to prowl around the bars" in hopes of becoming the next Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett (93). The deleterious effect of Henry's midlife crisis on their financial affairs--and, so Gorgeous hints, on their sex life together--does not, however, deter Gorgeous from playing matchmaker for the other two.

Within seconds after meeting Merv Kant, who doesn't find Sara very "'funsy'" at first, Gorgeous says, "Maybe you should marry her." When he notes, "I've only spent five minutes with her," Gorgeous responds, "So what? Some people know at first sight" (28). As for Pfeni, Gorgeous believes that her younger sister is simply wasting her time with Geoffrey. "Don't you think it's time she considered someone even remotely available?" she asks Sara. "Don't you think it's time she stopped living her life like she was on an extended junior year abroad?" (33). Convinced that Pfeni is wandering herself "right out of the marketplace," Gorgeous asks "don't you want what any normal woman wants?" (72).

In response to Gorgeous' remarks, Michael Feingold wryly imagines the prospect of "a postperformance discussion, Camille Paglia and Susan Faludi mud wrestling over the dubious assumptions that question implies." In her previous plays, he says, Wasserstein "pulled these hearth-and-home sentiments into a troubled, ironic dialectic with much different views" (84). Gorgeous, however, is not Wasserstein, and despite how critics and audiences regard the Rosensweigs' trysts, to think the playwright asserts that "a girl--even an updated independent 90s sort of girl--is happier when she has a nice man" oversimplifies Wasserstein's task in this play (Linda Winer, "'Sisters'" 76).

Even Feingold knows this represents "neither a sensible nor an accurate summation of the state of intelligent women in the 1990s. Nor, more to the point, does it sum up the dynamic activity Wasserstein's play has been graphing" (84). Though audiences might conclude that without a loving husband "the sisters' achievements are worldly and hollow," he says, "I don't think people who publish books and make financial megadeals view their work that way" (84).

I don't think Sara and Pfeni view it that way, either, and though men do play a pivotal role in their lives and in this play, the dynamic activity Wasserstein has been graphing should not lead, as Jack Kroll presupposes, to the deduction that a "feminist writer" finally wants to show her female characters being "saved by a real *mensch*" who will cheer away the blues wrought by their single-mindedly pursuing career fulfillment ("Gotta Have Heart" 104). On the contrary, in fact, the sisters Rosensweig prove quite convincingly that they do not *need* men. As Paul Hodgins notes, they "have learned (or are in the painful process of learning) how to negotiate life's tortuous road map without a man. And each, in her own inimitable and often hilarious way, succeeds, although . . . complete happiness remains a distant and possibly unattainable goal" ("Southern California" 8).

Though they do not need men to feel complete, the sisters Rosensweig like men, however, and remain open to being and falling in love. Sexual politics aside, most women feel the same, and any "feminism that fails to recognize these facts will, of necessity, fail" (Tong 24). Wasserstein clearly knows this; yet, as Jan Stuart says to pinpoint the problem, the sisters Rosensweig are--like Wasserstein's other uncommon women--"exceptionally intelligent, dauntingly overachieving and resultingly bereft of men capable of giving them what they need" (63).

Sandra Meyer, Wasserstein's older sister and the model for Lillian Cornwall in Isn't It Romantic, is in this play the inspiration for Sara Goode. Aptly described by Walter Shapiro as "one of the first generation of pioneering executive women" (92), she is credited, for instance, with being the "marketing executive for General Foods, [who] came up with the idea of putting Tang on the moon" (Barney 50). Currently with Clark & Weinstock, management consultants, Meyer has a resume that reads like a dream-list for women's business studies: "first female product-group manager at General Foods, in 1969; the first female president of a division of American Express, in 1980; and the first female to run corporate affairs as a senior officer at Citicorp, in 1989." Remembering her from childhood as a "mythical, glamorous alternative to the bouffant-hair-sprayed mothers

at the Parent-Teacher Association," Wasserstein says Meyer "was always the only woman along her corridor [at General Foods] who wasn't sitting outside an office glued behind a typewriter and a telephone" ("Don't Tell Mother" 196).

Musing on her sister's career, however, Wasserstein says, "I wish that my sister would tell me what toll her life has taken on her. . . . My sister would say that life takes its toll, male or female, period. I heartily disagree. I can't help but wonder what difference it would have made in my sister's personal or corporate life if she had been a man" ("Don't Tell Mother" 197). Because The Sisters Rosensweig is, as Linda Winer states, "Sara's story at heart" ("Sisters'" 76), Wasserstein, I believe, imagines the toll somewhat through the private life of Sara, who, like Meyer, is an unmarried career mother and double divorcee.

Meyer, to whom Wasserstein dedicates The Sisters Rosensweig, distances herself from the toll on Sara, however, saying that her "issues are different" in both her private and political realm (Miller H8). "Sandra would say that if you're a player, gender shouldn't be an issue. But, for my generation, gender is the issue. . . . What my sister won't discuss," she adds to exemplify her point, "is why so many of her male corporate contemporaries have become chairmen and she has not" ("Don't Tell Mother" 197, 199).

Wasserstein does not address the glass ceiling in Sara Goode's career--if, in fact, one exists for Sara--but in the general arena of gender issues and as an undercurrent to the play's middle-aged retrospective, Wasserstein casually encircles her heroines' love affairs with a subtle suggestion about the interplay of career and private life, and--evincing a materialist mode--she observes, though never resolves, the seeming inevitability that women in high-octane careers have "confused relationships with men" (Hoban 34).

To appreciate Wasserstein's position on the interaction of the two, as well as the understated way she observes it, one must first discard the misconception that manlessness or, in *Gorgeous*' case, man-listlessness has caused the sense of "pain . . . anger . . . and simple sadness" the sisters Rosensweig exude in the play (Richards, "School of Life" H5). Their vulnerability, so palpable at times, sits instead at the thick of their middle-aged self-analysis, which--as Wasserstein reveals--involves much more than man trouble.

Although each has her own crosses to bear, they share one sorrow in common: the recent death of their mother, Rita Rosensweig, who pervades their thoughts, conversation, and--given the circumstances--their understandably brittle emotions. In fact, as *Gorgeous* notes to Merv, their mother's passing explains in part "why we're all here for [Sara's]

birthday" (31). In Sara's case, particularly, Rita Rosensweig's demise involves a number of issues. For one, because of a recent hysterectomy, she did not attend the funeral. Sara's hysterectomy alone could explain her brittleness and fatigue, but, more importantly, it does explain why at 54 she not only seems depressed "about aging" (Barney 51), but also might begin to mourn the alleged loss of her appeal as a woman. If so, she doesn't feel "sexually repressed" or hungry for a man in her life, as Doug Watt claims ("Drawing-Room" 77), but anxious to reestablish her sexual being for her own self-image, a point that sensibly accounts for her "reluctant attraction" to (Brustein, "The Editorial Play" 34) and willingness to sleep with the Jewish nationalist and "odd man in," Merv Kant (Watt, "'Sister'" 77).

Although Gorgeous says that their mother "really missed saying good-bye" to her, Sara doesn't appear to feel guilty about missing the funeral. Gorgeous' comment seems to imply, instead, that Sara's absence owed less to the hysterectomy than to past conflicts between Sara and their mother. When Gorgeous says Rita "wanted to see us all happy," Sara retorts, "We are happy, Gorgeous. It's just not our mother's kind of happiness" (36).

Returning to her reoccurring mother-daughter motif, Wasserstein, in this case, demonstrates how matriarchal

influence still troubles Sara's life. Borrowing Lola Wasserstein's nickname for Sandra Meyer (Finn 366), Rita, recalls Gorgeous, referred to Sara as a brilliant "shtarker," which Pfeni defines as a "person who takes charge" or a "general in the Cossack army" (95). "I remember coming home with a 99," recollects Sara, "and her shrieking at me, 'Where's the other point?'" Adding wryly that she became a banker because "no one ever called me Gorgeous," Sara implies that she has been mulling the source and price of her past choices in the backdrop of her mother's death (36).

In addition to the hysterectomy and Rita's death, as well as all the emotional baggage accompanying both, Sara also worries about Tessie, her "near-radicalized daughter" (Watt, "Drawing-Room" 77), who threatens not only to abandon an Oxford education but also to join the Lithuanian resistance with her "dopey but good-natured punker boyfriend" (Simon, "The Best So Far" 100). "She's determined to make her life the opposite of mine," wails Sara. When Pfeni reminds her that this is "exactly what we set out to do because of our mother," Sara responds, "but we were right" (11). Despite her facetious remark, Tessie's rebellion concerns Sara and not only complicates her multifaceted midlife retrospective but also provides another reason for her feeling "morally and spiritually adrift"

(Richards, "School of Life" H5) and placing "her emotional life . . . in a . . . safe-deposit box" (Kroll, "Gotta Have Heart" 104).

Because of Rita's "strong influence on her adult daughters" (Gussow, "Comedy" C3), Pfeni also seems to be coping with the fallout of her mother's death. Pfeni's grief explodes when Geoffrey leaves, leading her to cry to Sara, "I don't want to lose Geoffrey and Mommy at the same time" (90). Complicating her remorse, though, she, like Sara, apparently has some unsettled history with their mother. When she remarks to Gorgeous, "I'm not every mother's dream daughter," Gorgeous tells her not to "waste [her] time rebelling against Mother anymore. She's not even here to enjoy it" (72).

Rita Rosensweig's death is not, however, the main thing making Pfeni restless, cranky, and "not at home in the world" (Stein 22). Tessie tells her that, according to Sara, "you compulsively travel because you have a fear of commitment, and when you do stay in one place, you become emotional and defensive" (7). Although, as critics suggest, this seems to imply that Pfeni, a "funky, peripatetic journalist" (Hoban 32), "restlessly ricochets between the world's flash points" (Kroll, "Gotta Have Heart" 104) and "lives more for the escape of travel than for the art of writing" (Henry, "Reborn" 69), she likes the lifestyle, has

earned enormous respect for her work, and, as Sara knows, has "a true calling" for what she does (78).

Nevertheless, as Pfeni says at the outset, her "life is stuck" (17). On the edge of her own middle-aged retrospect, she not only has considered settling down with Geoffrey but also has begun to bring to terms her past journalistic life with the present one. As her Life in the Afghan Village illustrates, Pfeni formerly worked as a "journalistic voice of the oppressed masses (Kissel, "Family Circus" 47), but after inexplicably abandoning the "political bent" of her work (Barnes, "Wendy's Wonderful" 24), she has now become "dissatisfied writing superficial travel articles" (Barney 50).

Pfeni's principal crisis in this play, as well as the main source of her unhappiness, then, centers on her career and, more specifically, on the fact that she "avoids the serious writing she should be doing" (Richards, "School of Life" H5). She tells Geoffrey that she has a "new book about gender and class working in a crock pot somewhere in Tajikistan" (68) and tells Sara that she needs "the hardship of the Afghan women and the Kurdish suffering to fill up my life for me" (77). As Judith Miller explains, unlike Sara, Pfeni "is passionate about her work, about her writing, but she seems to have trouble doing it. To escape finishing her long-in-progress book on women in Tajikistan, she travels

endlessly, penning articles on 'Bombay by Night,' or 'Bombay by Day'" (H8).

As "the author's stand-in" (Gerard, 1992 Rev. 70), Pfeni represents Wasserstein's own periodic writer's block. As Wasserstein herself explains, "'I guess I was doing the same thing. . . . Like Pfeni, I was beginning to do too many essays, too much speaking, too many things other than writing plays.'" Calling it an "'evasion--a way of putting off the confrontation with the blank first page,'" Wasserstein says that "'Pfeni's not writing . . . may be why this play was written'" (Miller H8).

Unlike Wasserstein, however, Pfeni does not seem to recognize the syndrome. Reflecting on what she has told Sara she needs, Pfeni says that "if I'm that empty, then I might as well continue to wander to the best hotels, restaurants, and poori stands" (77). However, as Sara says of the Afghan and Kurdish women Pfeni misses, "how are you helping them if you don't tell their stories? Is it morally better to dispatch four-star Karachi hotel reviews? . . . I think you care too much and you're looking for excuses not to" (77-8).

In this light, Geoffrey appears to have arrived at just the right time in Pfeni's life to provide the distraction she needed to justify changing or ending her stalled career. An "ebullient but labile heterosexual" (Simon, "The Best So Far" 100), he charms everyone "with high spirits and bitchy

anecdotes," and together they seem like a couple sincerely fond of each other (Oliver, "Chez Rosensweig" 105). Unfortunately, however, they can only squeeze their relationship in between his always being in rehearsal and her being "in Timbuktu half the year" (17), and, ultimately, he understands before she does that their careers matter to them as much as love does. "Of course, we must cherish those that we love," he tells her. "But just as important, people like you and me have to work even harder to create the best art . . . that we possibly can. And the rest, the children, the country kitchen, the domestic bliss, we leave to others who will have different regrets" (69).

Although Pfeni initially feels very hurt when Geoffrey deserts her, she rebounds quickly. If his leaving really mattered, says Alexis Greene, she would suffer "for at least a week" (33), but it simply makes her confront why she loved him in the first place and what she really wants in her life. As she says to Gorgeous in her last scene, "if you only write 'Bombay by Night' and you make sure to fall in love with men who can never really love you back, one morning you wake up at forty in your big sister's house, and where you should be seems sort of clear" (100-01).

Unlike her sisters, Gorgeous is "an ostensibly happily married mother of four" (Miller H1) who "has wholeheartedly embraced their late mother's dream" (Stuart 77) by adopting

"attitudes that belong to women raised 20 years before her" (Linda Winer, "'Sisters'" 76). As such, she acts as a foil to Sara, not only by parading their Jewish past but also by interfering in Sara's domestic affairs until, sternly rebuking her, Sara reminds Gorgeous, "you are not our mother" (75).

Because she seems like a "ditzy, motor-mouthed Jewish matron" (Barney 49), Gorgeous is a "virtual compendium of laugh-getting quirks" and "apologetic materialism" (Richards, "School of Life" H5). Loosely based on Wasserstein's other sister, Georgette Levis, Gorgeous outwardly lives up to her nickname, the same one Morris Wasserstein gave to Levis, because, as Sandra Meyer notes, at "'eight, she was already elegant'" (Saline 90). However, Gorgeous, a "bargain-basement shopper" who "wears counterfeit couture" (Kron V12), looks more "like a dish of raspberry sherbet wearing gold jewelry" who swoops into the play to accessorize her sisters' lives with men and fashion hints (Richards, "School of Life" H5). Although she has a career as a self-credentialed psychiatrist who dispenses advice like a "non-Teutonic Dr. Ruth" (Kroll, "Gotta Have Heart" 104), Gorgeous nonetheless strikes everyone as a "sublimely ridiculous housewife and radio personality" (Hoban 32).

Gorgeous knows the impression she conveys, and because she feels acutely left behind in the luster of her sisters' enormously successful and challenging careers, she has decided at midlife to prove to herself and to others that she's not just an "upside-down-cake-of-a-Jewish-princess" (Kraft B7). This, for me, explains her restlessness and vulnerability in the play better than her husband's setbacks. Resenting general perception of her as a "superficial, unsophisticated suburban. . . . retro specimen" (Stearns, "'Sisters'" 4D), she tells Merv that The Dr. Gorgeous Show has made her a "real middle-aged success story" (31), and, on the basis of that achievement and her allegedly successful marriage, she accuses her sisters of jealousy. "Well, you can speak with your la-di-dah British accent," she screams at Sara, "and Pfeni can send my children postcards from every ca-ca-mamie capital in the world, but I know that deep inside both of you wish you were me" (75).

Because Gorgeous doesn't really believe this, she hopes a cable deal for her radio show will bring her the respectability she craves from others at this juncture in her life. It won't, but with or without the deal, she ends up proving to be a "special blend of philosopher and fool" anyway (Simon, "The Best So Far" 100). For one, as the play eventually reveals, Gorgeous "stifles the constant stress of

maintaining a cheery, or in her own word 'funny' demeanor, when life is falling apart at home" (Vallela 13). Alluding to Henry's setbacks, Madeline Kahn, who won a Tony Award for her portrayal of Gorgeous, admires the "'way [Gorgeous] carries that burden, the way it is revealed and what it takes to reveal it" (Specter C9). In other words, Gorgeous discovers in this play that she possesses strengths unnoticed by everyone--herself included--and that, although her media career offers "just a little sparkle" (30), it won't bring her Sara's and Pfeni's spotlight and doesn't need to.

"Gorgeous is interesting in terms of feminism," says Wasserstein. "Her type is the easy butt of jokes. But in the end, I make her a person of dignity" (Personal Interview 1995). As Jan Stuart notes, Wasserstein does this by ultimately making Gorgeous an "alluringly paradoxical" figure who "subverts her own cliché status" by denying herself "her biggest pleasure when it arrives: a real-label outfit" (77). For all her alleged superficiality, Gorgeous knows that, with her husband's misfortune, "somebody's got to pay for [her children's] tuition this fall, and better Chanel than Henry or me" (103).

Gorgeous is also interesting in terms of feminism because, of all the Rosensweigs, she ostensibly is the only one who has it all. As Merv says, "So you're the sister who

did everything right. You married the attorney, you had the children, you moved to the suburbs." Protesting, she says, "I am much more than that. . . . I am one of the first real jugglers" (30). Because she strikes no one as an uncommon woman, especially in comparison to her sisters, Gorgeous does not seem like a juggler. But she is. In fact, with four children and an unemployed, would-be sleuth and writer for husband, Gorgeous provides both financial and domestic security for her family.

Like Sara and Pfeni, Gorgeous, despite having it all, ultimately reflects the toll Wasserstein observes regarding the interplay of career and private life for uncommon women. It is simply this: whatever the reasons, Wasserstein's uncommon woman seemingly and frequently cannot sustain satisfying relationships with men. At 40, Pfeni has never married and has discovered the impossibility of commitment with Geoffrey. Sara has divorced two husbands and "doubt[s] there will be a third" (27), and though Gorgeous' problems with Henry admittedly materialize from his unexpected unemployment, one has to wonder why he did not accompany her on this trip to London. Although Mel Gussow suspects that "each has difficulty with men" because they "seldom seem worthy of the Rosensweigs" (Gussow, "Comedy" C3), Wasserstein appears to suggest that in Sara's and Pfeni's

situations, especially, men have difficulty with each of them and seldom seem willing to adjust.

If the exploration into the source of this toll seems muted, it's because in her persistent re-view of the toll, Wasserstein has already unveiled the causes. In Uncommon Women and Others, Kate Quin linked this toll to the way men perceived her extraordinary talent. "I guess it never occurred to me in college," she says, "that someone wouldn't want me to be quite so uncommon" (69). In Isn't It Romantic, Lillian Cornwall, predecessor to Sara Goode as a divorced mother and exceptional businesswoman, thought the toll generated from always having to be the one "to leave the office when the kid bumps his head on a radiator or slips on a milk carton. . . . I had a promising career, a child, and a husband," she tells her daughter, Harriet, and if "you're very conscientious, you still have to choose your priorities," which in Lillian's--and Sara's--case, meant choosing motherhood and career excellence over the demands of an unsupportive husband (134).

Janie Blumberg experienced the toll because of an ultimatum, the same one Scoop Rosenbaum eventually offered to Heidi: "It's either/or," he told her, either homemaker and parttime careerist, or full time careerist and no Marty, no Scoop (202). For Heidi, the alter ego to Pfeni as a single career woman, the toll proceeded from her wanting

the same things as Scoop: "Self-fulfillment. Self-determination. Self-exaggeration," in which case, he informed Heidi, "you'd be competing with me" (201).

As the plays reveal, then, the sources of the toll range in Wasserstein's eyes from the inability of men to understand the intellectual, professional, and career aspirations of the women who love them to an unwillingness by men to view the relationship as a supportive partnership. In The Sisters Rosensweig, Wasserstein effectively brings the toll to middle age, and though she manifests it by juxtaposing the sisters' careers alongside their past and present love life, the play neither traces nor resolves the causes but only observes the toll itself with an albeit most subtle lens.

When asked why her uncommon women seemingly have few successful relationships with men, Wasserstein said, "it's about yearning"--about wanting fulfillment in many things and not wanting to make the compromises that men under the same circumstances can largely ignore (Personal Interview 1995). According to a 1995 study by Catalyst, a women's professional support organization founded in 1960 by Felice Schwartz, women executives from Fortune 1000 companies reported workdays beginning at 4 a.m. before children awake and a need, therefore, for "sophisticated time-management skills, above-average physical stamina and supportive

husbands--if they are married--to get ahead." In addition, revealed one senior vice-president and chief financial officer, women "face the daunting challenge of a 'white noise' of male corporate culture that is pervasive but often unidentifiable" (Prasso C1-2).

To Robert Brustein, writing about the toll on Heidi Holland, the collision of private and professional life simply proves that "despite the typically American hunger for total fulfillment, it's just not possible to have it all" ("Extremis" 33-34). But he fails to recognize, as the Catalyst study reveals, that Heidi and all of Wasserstein's uncommon women face corporate odds and domestic expectations frequently different from the ones men face. As Wasserstein notes, for "all the doors that have been opened for women the battle isn't over" (Commencement Address 1990). In particular, as Sara, Pfeni, and Heidi discover, intimacy becomes especially problematic either because it requires a near-impossible juggling act or because--in Sara's words--"some men find [them] threatening" (26).

Because The Sisters Rosensweig shows other avenues of middle-aged retrospective more noticeably and evinces to most a seemingly harmless tone of romance, Wasserstein's evocation of gender politics courses through the play like a noiseless current, one that nonetheless has clearly touched the lives of Sara and Pfeni especially. The undertow,

however, has far from drowned them. Despite the impasse, this "unlikely trio of gladiators" have shown through their extraordinary careers and inexhaustible tenacity that they can survive quite well on their own, and though a number of insecurities ail them at the play's beginning, they not only renew and "'reinvent themselves,'" says Wasserstein, with "some help from their sometimes-misguided but loving siblings" (Hodgins, "Southern California" 8), but also prove that, though sisterhood may have failed Heidi, it isn't dead. "Husbands and boyfriends come and go, parents pass away and children leave the nest," says Melanie Kirkpatrick, "but sisters don't let you down" (A11). Huddling together on the sofa near the end of the play, they realize that, even though one "moment of pure, unadulterated happiness" seems problematic (96), by bonding "as siblings, they can anticipate a more promising future" (Gussow, "Comedy" C3).

Ending the play with this sentiment achieves two things. On one hand, it makes The Sisters Rosensweig Wasserstein's "valentine to her family" (Finn 366). Though she denies that it depicts the sisters Wasserstein--"'part real, part made up,'" she says--the play's director, Dan Sullivan, states that "'the family dynamic portrayed in the play is very similar'" (Miller H8). "'We've always been supportive of each other,'" says Sandra Meyer (Hoban 34),

sort of like a "'permanent T-Group. . . . Me and my sisters"
(Saline 91).

Finally, though it examines among other things the role of men in women's lives, The Sisters Rosensweig ultimately celebrates "the idea of women passing on the torch of their womanhood" (Greene 33). As the granddaughter of Esther Malchah, Sara returns to Ciechocinek, Poland, and by "deciding how to put bread on the tables of those who had so blithely driven them all away," she says, "I couldn't help but see it all as a minor triumph for the women . . . in my mother's faded photographs." In the same vein, one can appreciate Pfeni's decision to write of other women's plight in Afghan villages and Tajikistan as a corollary and fitting tribute to the harsh conditions under which her grandmother and the other "lucky few had escaped with false passports" (80). Finally, as daughters of Rita Rosensweig, a woman who, according to family legend, "could make the Cossacks run away" (106), Sara, Pfeni, and Gorgeous "learned gumption at their mother's knee" and continue to foster their matriarchal tradition of resilience through unabashedly affectionate sisterhood (Greene 33).

For now, the one carrying the torch at the end of the Rosensweig line is Tessie Goode. She is Sara's daughter, Pfeni's "kindred spirit" (Stuart 63), and, as everyone "always told me," says Sara, "'just like Rita'" (106).

Though Tessie has also come to a crossroads in her life, trying to determine her place in the world as a non-practicing Jew and American expatriate in London, she too will survive. As Rita Rosensweig and "her stunningly brilliant daughters" have proven (95), even at middle age there "are real possibilities in life" for uncommon women and others (106).

Chapter 6

Fem-en(act)ment Revisited

Although the Wasserstein oeuvre as I have presented it contains just four major plays, her numerous essays, film scripts, and other minor dramas, as well as the proliferation of awards she has won, indicate that she not only maintains high visibility but also possesses a fairly strong reputation. Despite her achievements, however, not one publisher seems to have anthologized her works, and few professors list her material in the thousands of course syllabi distributed to literature classes every year. Though Wasserstein's "triple whammy" (Personal Interview 1995) undoubtedly contributes to these omissions and not only excludes her from serious academic consideration but also precludes her place in the esteemed canon, I believe, especially in the context of fem-en(act)ment, that Wasserstein distinguishes herself as one of the most important writers in contemporary American literature.

Although several factors impinge on Wasserstein's inclusion in the canon, some critics attribute her absence, in part, to the perception that, with only four major plays in approximately 20 years and one other currently being readied for workshop production, she doesn't seem like a very prolific *playwright* (Miller H8). This viewpoint is

misleading and sidesteps the fact that Wasserstein not only writes in other media, including a recently completed children's book entitled Pamela's First Musical, but also works as a contributing editor for New Woman, a position she once held with the now-defunct New York Woman.

More importantly, Wasserstein has, in fact, produced a number of other dramas, some of which even contain the feminist undercurrent, subtle or otherwise, found in her major works. In 1973, for instance, Playwrights Horizons staged Any Woman Can't, whose principal character, says Wasserstein, "is sort of a prelude to Janie and Harriet." After failing a dance audition, the heroine--with shades of Harriet more than of Janie--"sort of gives up and marries someone she doesn't love" (Personal Interview 1995).

She has also collaborated with Christopher Durang on When Dinah Shore Ruled the World, presented at the Yale Cabaret in 1975. "About role models," says Wasserstein, it depicts four women in a beauty pageant and, like Any Woman Can't, interacts with another Wasserstein play by including the "emotional life" of Holly Kaplan, who mistakenly becomes a pageant contestant (Personal Interview 1995). In addition, Wasserstein has written a one-act play Tender Offer, presented by the Ensemble Studio Theatre in 1983; The Man in a Case, staged by the Acting Company in 1986; "Smart Women, Brilliant Choices," a segment for the production of

Urban Blight at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1988; and two other Playwrights Horizons productions, Happy Birthday, Montpelier Pa-zazz in 1976 and the failed 1986 musical, Miami. In other words, if productivity matters in canonical inclusion--and, realistically, it has only marginal influence--then, contrary to perception, Wasserstein not only qualifies but also has possibly equalled or surpassed the entire output of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Although the canon itself has no clear membership or standard of excellence, admission to it, as with any exclusive club, appears mainly to reflect the preferences of those who select and the essence and longevity of those who already belong. As Jill Dolan asserts, in terms of ideology--both structural and cultural--the canon generally "expands its ranks only for those works that already resemble its historical members," a condition perpetuated in part, she says, because the "invisibility of both its constructors and the origins of its construction render the canon peculiarly (but purposefully) remote from question or attack" (Feminist Spectator 32, 31).

Tying together both research and conjecture, Jane Tompkins in Sensational Designs examines the canonization of Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, and concludes that his position as a literary lion seemingly originated not so much from artistic merit but from the combination of savvy

salesmanship, nepotism, and the good-old-boys' network, and it maintains itself, she purports, largely through subsequent generations of academics reluctant to risk ridicule by questioning his preeminence. At the heart of her work, Tompkins wants mainly to demonstrate how writers like Hawthorne have benefitted--and still do benefit--from privileges and literary codes removed from women's experience. Ultimately, therefore, like Dolan, she believes that institutionalized cultural and literary ideology has led historically to the canonization of somewhat divergent imitators and, with few exceptions, to the marginalization of those on the peripheries of that ideology.

For Dolan and Tompkins, the ideology in question is patriarchal. This assumption may or may not be true, but I suspect that the governing ideology for literary style and substance is, nonetheless, traditional. For dramatists, then, a work whose formula resembles the Aristotelian model for structural unities and tragic hero--male tragic hero, for that matter--probably makes critics and academics more attuned to its potential merits than, say, one with Wasserstein's tendency toward episodic construction and women characters who make life-choices. "Though women are often said to write 'small tragedies,'" she says in self-defense, "they are our tragedies, and therefore large, and therefore legitimate" (Betsko 426). From a traditional,

critical perspective, however, neither the style nor the substance of those tragedies belongs to the tradition of Shakespeare, Miller, or Williams, and when critics fail to appreciate alternative forms of drama or to acknowledge "female systems of signification" such as Wasserstein utilizes, they tend to dismiss the underlying meanings of the work and to render it marginal or non-canonical (Dolan, Feminist Spectator 20).

Dolan believes that only "a shift in the gender of the spectator . . . will fundamentally disrupt the construction of the canon" (Feminist Spectator 39). I agree, but only to a point. Some of the spectators who still subscribe to traditional assumptions about what makes good writing and good drama are, after all, women, and some of them find Wasserstein's works, for instance, entertaining but not aesthetically satisfying in terms of their cinematic structure and tragi-comic content. The shift needed to diversify the canon, therefore, lies not in gender but in critical practices.

In the case of women's literature, feminist literary criticism in particular has loosened traditional analytic approaches not only to reconstruct literature by women and deconstruct literature by men about women but also to develop methodologies suitable for evaluating it all. The field is still, relatively speaking, new, however,

especially with regard to drama, so that as Dolan points out, even feminist reviewers feel trapped between praising and critiquing works "against a standard that is yet to be defined in the balance between ideology and art" (Feminist Spectator 36).

Feminist literary critics do largely agree on this, however: the canon--that is, if one believes in the necessity of a canon at all--must make room for more diverse measures to include not bad work but different work. Without diversification, Wasserstein faces particularly challenging circumstances for canonical inclusion. On one hand, despite being philosophically interesting and creative, she does not, as Dolan would say, resemble her predecessors. Secondly, compared to novelists, dramatists--and especially those who, like Wasserstein, work in a comedic vein--tend to be underrepresented in the canon altogether and women dramatists, in particular, are rendered nearly invisible.

Whether or not one regards the canon itself as too politically and culturally prescribed to be of use, the quest for fair, artistic evaluation still remains, one that must advocate not only variant criteria but also the notion that critics and academics become "responsive to and resistant [ital. mine] to text and performance in ways that are still difficult to conceive" (Mandl 126). For her part, Tompkins has abandoned the "question of literary value"

based on "asking whether a work is unified or discontinuous, subtle, complex, or profound," because those criteria represent to her the ideology that helps to stigmatize certain works. Instead, her critical *modus operandi* first relates a text "to the historical circumstances and the contemporary cultural discourse to which it seems most closely linked" and then asks if the text achieves its aims and whether the aims have any value (38). "I see [texts] as doing a certain kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation," she says, and "as providing society with a means of thinking about itself." Essentially, therefore, she replaces the traditional critical perspective that judges the merit of a work by its "attempts to achieve a timeless, universal ideal of truth and formal coherence" with one that accentuates its purpose and cultural framework (200).

In the quest to devise new measures for critical assessment, *fem-en(act)ment* represents my contribution to feminist literary criticism as a contextual way to study women's theatre and, in this case, to establish Wendy Wasserstein as a major dramatic figure. Wasserstein's plays are *fem-en(act)ment*: theatrical works guided by a feminist disposition that thematically and stylistically enact situations of interest to women, the psychological and social effects of which form the core of her drama.

What makes Wasserstein's dramas particularly significant in terms of fem-en(act)ment is the effect they achieve collectively. Although they do not quite replicate the entire life cycle, they read all together like the ages of woman. Her heroines graduate college, pursue careers, and reach middle age in a pattern that makes her works sometimes seem like sequels to one another. "Maybe they do react to the previous plays," says Wasserstein. Although she adds facetiously that they must seem "like a prolonged manic episode" (Personal Interview 1995), they present a profound picture of the main idea Wasserstein wants to enact: the impact of the women's movement on private life.

To explore that impact, Wasserstein examines and re-examines the same themes and motifs in nearly every play: careers, mother-daughter relationships, sisterhood, and the relationships between uncommon women and the men they love. Every play ultimately is about choices, however, and from her uncommon women to the sisters Rosensweig, every choice has an almost inextricable connection to feminism, especially in terms of the possibilities it has created and the life it has carved between career and family. Age changes the perspective, but ultimately the question simply shifts from "Where am I going?" to "Where have I been?"

In terms of the issues so important to her, The Sisters Rosensweig represents a thematic tour de force for

Wasserstein. The sisters are her uncommon women, roughly twenty to thirty years older, still grappling with the impact of the women's movement. In retrospect, Pfeni at 40 continues to review her career options like Kate Quin and company. Gorgeous attempts to have it all. Sara and Tessie resurrect the mother-daughter battlegrounds that Wasserstein initiated with Janie and Tasha Blumberg. The sisters discover the sisterhood that eluded Heidi Holland, and the prospect for loving, sustained relationships with men remains as problematic as it did for Kate, Janie, and Heidi.

By returning to the same concerns and showing their impact at different stages, Wasserstein effectively utilizes the cyclic strategy associated with feminist-inspired writing, a strategy she applies to the feminist theoretical implications in her work as well. The liberal feminist perspective throughout the collection is particularly prevalent by virtue of Wasserstein's emphasis in every play on the process or consequences of making choices, especially as she posits that women--uncommon women, in particular--have both the prerogative and the competence to pursue a professional life on equal footing with men. That they seemingly can not balance their careers with romance or marriage in the same way as men, however, comprises the focus of her materialist feminist mode. Though she never resolves the conundrum regarding this balance, she

manifests its causes, development, or repercussions in each play and recognizes it in her own life as well. "'Right about now we'd be divorced and sitting at opposite ends of the temple during the bar mitzvah,'" she says of her own near-encounter with marriage, "'and I probably wouldn't have written most of my plays'" (Kennedy 64).

Wasserstein's observations about herself regarding career and marriage exemplify the influence of her own experiences on the theoretical and thematic conditions of her plays. On the whole, the works do not really create strict autobiography, even with the many doses of private memory and family-based characterization, but her tone and viewpoint are clearly autobiographical and theoretically typical, as well, of cultural feminist literature. Although Wasserstein's mother-daughter paradigm and emphasis on female friendship also reflect cultural feminism, its most evident manifestation lies in the non-linear, episodic style that she recycles in all but The Sisters Rosensweig.

If The Sisters Rosensweig represents Wasserstein's thematic tour de force, then The Heidi Chronicles represents her theoretical tour de force. Heidi's conviction that "all people deserve to fulfill their potential" (181), the sentiment that lies at the heart of both the play and her work in general, is ostensibly a slogan for liberal feminism. Scoop's ultimatum that it's "either/or" (202), on

the other hand, provides the framework for Wasserstein's materialist feminist inquiry, while the autobiographical nuances, consciousness-raising scene, sisterhood theme, and Heidi's decision to adopt, along with the play's wildly episodic and sweeping panorama of personal and political history, all together make The Heidi Chronicles an absolute gem of cultural feminist theatre and sensibility.

Despite the theoretical and thematic gravity of her depiction of feminism's impact on private life, Wasserstein defuses it with a "Mask of Humor" (Barney 50), one that she exercises with such mastery that theatre critics who evaluate her work as performance drama tend to write profusely about her "very large gift for being funny" (Eder 48) and--especially--about her instincts for dispensing "witty observations and smart one-liners" (Watt, "'Sisters'" 77). According to Howard Stein, this tactic diminishes her stature as a playwright. Since even "grief in Wasserstein's plays . . . [is] handled in the spirit of dark comedy and black humor," he says (25), her comic style becomes a "camouflaging element," and, consequently, by not "providing the script with the seriousness that their subjects" deserve, her convictions are rendered to near-invisibility (24).

Though I agree with Stein that Wasserstein's humor damages her appeal to the serious analyst, I don't agree

that it prevents her from enacting the issues she wants to explore, and, therefore, I consider the bias against her unfounded. In the case of The Sisters Rosensweig, for example, Clive Barnes deemed its serio-comic formula as "Anton Chekhov reincarnated as a mixture of Neil Simon and Woody Allen" ("Wendy's Wonderful" 24). Likewise, Phoebe Hoban called it "Mary Tyler Moore meets Chekhov" (34). The point is this: a play requires far more than the presence of three sisters to earn even the remotest comparison to Chekhov, a conventionally acclaimed serious dramatist who--like Wasserstein--"had the objectivity to mock his characters' flaws and delusions . . . [and] the sympathy to portray their hopes and sorrows" (Kozikowski 453) while utilizing "the comic, the absurd or the eccentric" (Pitcher 13).

Quite aware of the delicate scale on which her plays develop, Wasserstein says the "trick" is "to find the balance" between humor and bathos (Rosensweig x). I think she succeeds in achieving that equilibrium, and with critics' sometimes accentuating the comedy more, I have chosen to engage in a counterbalancing act myself by not quite ignoring her humor but by neutralizing it against her more serious aims.

Interestingly, Wasserstein regards the way her plays "relate in style and structure" specifically in terms of how

she handles their bathic and comic tone. "I think they skip a generation," she says. "Uncommon Women and Others and The Heidi Chronicles are comedic, but not from a comedic vein. Isn't It Romantic and The Sisters Rosensweig have a boulevard comedy structure. It's the difference between comedy vs. a play of ideas" (Personal Interview 1995). Though not staged yet, Wasserstein's new play, An American Daughter, follows this tradition of alternating her uses of humor, especially since--conversely--she plans to make its successor a farce. "Still comedic," An American Daughter is an "issue-driven" work that "goes darker," she says, than any of her previous plays (Personal Interview 1995).

Though still in draft stages and subject, therefore, to change, An American Daughter certainly reads darker than her others. Like the sisters Rosensweig, its middle-age heroine, Dr. Lyssa Dent Hughes, reflects on past choices that ostensibly have led, in this case, to her having it all at the expense of juggling the demands of her personal and professional life. However, as a nominee for Secretary of Health and Human Services, she also finds herself in the midst of a controversy reminiscent, on one hand, of Hillary Clinton's image-problem as wife and mother vs. uncommon woman, and, on the other, of the failed nominations of Kimba Woods and Zoe Baird to the office of Attorney General.

Significantly, An American Daughter does exactly what Wasserstein's other plays do without quite the broad swath of humor. It not only frames Lyssa's dilemmas *directly* around the past and current state of feminism but also resurrects familiar issues of choice, female friendships, and relationships with men. Theoretically and thematically, therefore, it manifests fem-en(act)ment and represents another link--another plateau--in Wasserstein's examination of the impact of the women's movement on private life.

Despite its connection to the others as an ongoing reflection of uncommon women, An American Daughter seems, nonetheless, riskier than Wasserstein's predecessors. "It is a watershed," she admits (Personal Interview 1995). For one, she confronts the anomalies of Washington politics, juxtaposing spin doctors, the media, and Lyssa's politically savvy father, an Indiana senator, against the blurred lines of her characters' liberal and conservative viewpoints. For the first time, as well, Wasserstein introduces into her cast of uncommon women an African-American, Dr. Judith B. Kaufman, Lyssa's closest friend, who, like Lyssa, has reached a crossroads in her personal and professional life. Judith's work in breast cancer also allows Wasserstein--even if only momentarily--to posit its devastation upon women as the sometimes less publicized corollary to the specter of AIDS, which in this play becomes another subsidiary topic

through her paradoxically conservative gay character, Morrow McCarthy.

In a sense, the play seems to break new ground--more serious ground in both type and tenor. Though loaded with various issues and innuendoes, its center remains focused as fem-en(act)ment and, consequently, as a darker vehicle in Wasserstein's repertoire, it raises the stakes of feminism's impact. Janie loses Marty, Heidi loses sisterhood and Scoop, and the Rosensweigs lose inner peace, but Lyssa loses her nomination. In the end, having failed to become a cabinet member and--in another devastating development--to save her marriage, she appears stunningly undaunted and undiminished, but one feels her losses more unnervingly, perhaps, than those of her predecessors.

In the process of exploring Lyssa's collision with the realities of feminism in her public and private life, Wasserstein further expands the boundaries of fem-en(act)ment by also taking on the new guard of feminism, so to speak, and juxtaposing both Lyssa and Judith against the self-serving and much younger Quincy Quince. Although Quincy states "how grateful women of my generation are to" the pioneers of gender equality (unpublished ms. 7), she proves disdainful of the "mistake the first generation of feminists made" in seeking parity at the alleged expense of personal happiness (unpublished ms. 29) and becoming, in the process,

a "prisoner of [their] gender's and [their] generation's miscalculation that liberation was in fact the assumption of both her own and her opposite gender's responsibilities" (unpublished ms. 47). As Lyssa's failure to retain the nomination attests, women are prisoners of gender, but Quincy's failure lies in her inability to decipher both the ongoing alliance between the personal and political and the precarious relationship between private and professional desire.

Though politically explosive, An American Daughter ultimately reveals what it means to be human, and, as Lyssa's dilemma and Quincy's neo-feminism indicate, it clearly operates in the arena of fem-en(act)ment by framing the current polarization in the women's movement against the ongoing bombardment of women who dare to admit, support, or profit from feminism. As a self-described feminist, Wasserstein plainly defends feminist position in this play--even though critics may again suggest otherwise--yet with her pluralist disposition toward feminist ideology, she never sides here or elsewhere with any one faction in the internal debate of the women's movement.

Quincy, I suspect, really represents Wasserstein's long-brewing concern for the way she thinks the current generation, in particular, seems to view feminism. What "really worries her," says Sharon Elder, "is that nowadays

too many younger women neither understand nor appreciate the issues that gave birth to feminism in the first place" (26). As Mary Ann Glendon notes, though some women distance themselves from their "strange brew" of aggressiveness and "rigid party line" on family and sexuality, second-wave feminists, "to their everlasting credit, broke new ground in the economic and political spheres" that the current generation would otherwise not have (A7). Quincy may believe it's "up to my generation to make feminism into a positive experience again" (unpublished ms. 29), but, as a Rhodes scholar and published author, she provides living proof that the "emancipations of 1970s feminism live on" (Glendon A7).

More to the point, the emancipations live on in Wasserstein. As Nina Burleigh says, her "commercial success on Broadway is proof . . . that the efforts of the women's movement have borne fruit" (8). For Wasserstein, feminism begins to make choice possible. It certainly made her choice to become a playwright possible, even though she warns that as "long as you can go into a room in Hollywood and someone says, "I can't make it, it's about girls" . . . it's not over'" ("Have It All?" 216).

Perhaps not. But Wasserstein has still given American drama something it never had: a body of work about uncommon women. It might not reflect the experiences of all women in her audience, but they "often seem to emerge with a common

feeling . . . [that] she's on our side" (Span G1). It might not reflect the dramatic traditions of the canon, but with few predecessors to imitate, it could not and should not. It might not triumph with critics who judge drama by its tragic pulse and so-called universal appeal, but it succeeds under a new critical vision called fem-en(act)ment.

It is her own, and, as the chronicler of uncommon women, Wendy Wasserstein knows why it must proceed: "*Nulla res melior feminae re,*" she says, "or, very roughly, there's no business like women's business" ("Heidi Chronicled" 132).

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Appendix

Production History: New York City and Television

Major Plays of Wendy Wasserstein

Uncommon Women and Others

Opened on 21 November 1977
Presented by the Phoenix Theatre at the
Marymount Manhattan Theatre in New York City
Directed by Steven Robman

Televised in May 1978
Presented by PBS Great Performances
Directed by Steven Robman and Merrily Mossman

Revived in October 1994
Presented by Second Stage Theatre at the Lucille Lortel
Theatre in New York City
Directed by Carole Rothman

Isn't It Romantic

Debuted in earlier version on 28 May 1981
Commissioned and presented by the Phoenix Theatre at
the Marymount Manhattan Theatre in New York City
Directed by Steven Robman

Opened in revised version on 15 December 1983
Presented by Playwrights Horizons in New York City
Directed by Gerald Gutierrez

The Heidi Chronicles

Opened on 12 December 1988 after workshop performances
at the Seattle Repertory Theatre in April 1988
Presented by Playwrights Horizons in New York City
Directed by Daniel Sullivan

Moved to the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway on 9 March
1989
Produced in association with Playwrights Horizons by
the Shubert Organization, Suntory International
Corp., and James Walsh.
Directed by Daniel Sullivan

Televised on 15 October 1995
Produced by TNT
Directed by Paul Bogart

The Sisters Rosensweig

Opened on 22 October 1992 after workshop performances
at the Seattle Repertory Theatre in April 1992
Presented at Lincoln Center Theater at the Mitzi E.
Newhouse
Directed by Daniel Sullivan

Moved to Broadway in March 1993
Presented at the Barrymore Theatre
Directed by Daniel Sullivan

Sources of Information:

Credits, PBS telecast of Uncommon Women and Others
Credits, TNT telecast of The Heidi Chronicles
Current Biography Yearbook 1989
Playbill (1994), Lucille Lortel Theatre, Uncommon Women
and Others
The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays
The Sisters Rosensweig

Vita

Gail Ciociola was born in Philadelphia to Margaret Dougherty and Francis Ciociola on October 16, 1948. A psychology major, she graduated in 1970 from Rosemont College, where she was named in her senior year to Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities. Ms. Ciociola later received master's degrees in Secondary Counseling (1975) and English (1986) from Villanova University, and in 1996 she earned her Ph.D. in American literature and feminist literary criticism from Lehigh University.

During 1978, Ms. Ciociola wrote a column for the *She* page of the Philadelphia Daily News, and interned as a reporter and book reviewer for the Philadelphia Inquirer during the summers of 1980 and 1981. She most recently published "The Feminist Impulse in Anne Sexton" (1994) and "Resolving the Father in [Len Roberts'] Black Wings (1993) for the New Review.

Ms. Ciociola has taught courses in American drama, American poetry, African-American drama, general American literature, and writing at Villanova University as an adjunct instructor since 1988. Prior to that, she taught literature and composition at Delaware Valley College. Active in secondary education, she also chaired English Curriculum Committee for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia between 1990 and 1995, served on Middle States Association

Committees in 1987 and 1991, has taught English in the Philadelphia area for 25 years, and since 1981 has successively chaired the English Department at three schools.

Among her honors, Ms. Ciociola was named a University Scholar by Lehigh University during the 1992-1993 academic year and earned a certificate of distinction for her doctoral examinations in 1993. She was also selected as Teacher of the Year at Archbishop Kennedy High School in Conshohocken PA in 1988, and was nominated in Philadelphia for the Distinguished Catholic Educator Award in the same year.