

CONFLICT UNRESOLVED: MEN'S RESPONSES TO SECOND WAVE FEMINISM IN WENDY WASSERSTEIN'S *ISN'T IT ROMANTIC* (1983) AND *THE HEIDI CHRONICLES* (1988)¹

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ABSTRACT. *Conflict Unresolved: Men's Responses to Second Wave Feminism in Wendy Wasserstein's Isn't It Romantic (1983) and The Heidi Chronicles (1988).* This article focuses on Wendy Wasserstein's (1950-2006) social commentary through drama in order to draw attention to the impact of feminist and men's movements on men. Specifically, it explores the role of men in terms of their relationships with women and their responses to the Second Wave of Feminism under the influence of men's movements in the 1980s through two Wasserstein plays, *Isn't It Romantic* (1983) and *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988). The analysis concludes that men failed to understand the aspirations and demands of women. Feeling that their manhood was threatened by feminists, men attacked and attempted to control them while using the gains of female liberation to their advantage at the same time.

Keywords: *feminist theater, Wendy Wasserstein, feminism, men's movements, American women playwrights.*

REZUMAT. *Conflict nerezolvat: reacții masculine la al doilea val de feminism în Isn't It Romantic (1983) și The Heidi Chronicles (1988) de Wendy Wasserstein.* Acest articol analizează comentariul social în teatrul lui Wendy Wasserstein (1950-2006) cu scopul de a atrage atenția asupra impactului mișcării feministe și a mișcării bărbaților asupra bărbaților. În fapt, se cercetează rolul bărbaților în privința relațiilor lor cu femeile și reacțiile lor la valul al doilea al feminismului sub influența mișcărilor bărbaților din anii 80 cu ajutorul a două piese de Wasserstein: *Isn't It Romantic*

¹ This article is derived from the author's MA thesis entitled *From Superiority to Equality?: Men's Voices in Wendy Wasserstein's Plays*.

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(1983) și *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988). Simțind că masculinitatea este amenințată de către feministe, bărbații contra-atacă și încearcă să redobândească controlul folosind câștigurile eliberării femeilor în propriul lor avantaj, de această dată.

Cuvinte cheie: teatrul feminist, Wendy Wasserstein, feminism, mișcările bărbaților, dramaturgia femeii americane.

As Julia T. Wood suggests, white American men have had certain rights and privileges throughout American history, especially in terms of enfranchisement, property ownership, and the social, economic, and legal systems, and therefore they have not been involved in as many organized movements as white American women (94). While men were enjoying their privileges, women were suffering from sexism and discrimination in public and private spheres, which urged them to participate in activities so that they could fight for their rights. This fight between the two sexes reached its peak after World War II when men returned from the battlefield and pushed women, who joined the workforce in the absence of men, back to kitchen (Milkman 470).

In the 1960s, the publication of Betty Friedan's renowned book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), became the foundational text for women who suffered from a "problem that has no name," which Friedan described as an indescribable depression and emptiness that a lot of well-educated, middle class housewives felt (78). The same year, *The Presidential Report on American Women* issued the inequalities at the workplace and documented the oppression of women as mothers or wives (Rosen 66-67). Women, who experienced an awakening, gathered under the motto, "personal is political" and as a result, a new women's liberation movement, the Second Wave of Feminism, began. Women demanded a new definition of marriage where the responsibilities of the two sexes are equal. They also called for the establishment of childcare centers, equal education and political participation (Rosen 78-79). These feminists accomplished a lot; however, along with the Second Wave of Feminism came the men's movements.

During the Second Wave, a lot of men supported women and fought with them for equality whereas another group of men rejected feminism and worked to reinforce and strengthen "traditional masculine roles, status, and the privileges" (Wood 95). Most men were baffled by the rules that were changing rapidly in the public sphere as a result of the liberation of women. Therefore, Men's Movement was split into different branches such as Men's Liberationists, Men's Rights Advocates, Radical Feminist Men, Social Feminist Men, Men of Color, Gay Male Liberationists, Promise Keepers, and the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, each of which focused on different aspects of what defined American manhood.

In an attempt to attract female spectators, who once was marginalized, feminist drama tends to ignore these movements. Laurin Porter suggests that a feminist drama places women to the center and “foregrounds” women’s experience. In these plays, patriarchy is defined as a controlling force shaped by men to limit women’s development (196). In this respect, Wendy Wasserstein’s³ plays, which mainly focus on the Second Wave of Feminism and its consequences, are such examples of feminist drama. Jill Dolan also claims that Wasserstein shifted the emphasis from fathers and sons to mothers and daughters in her plays (448). However, this does not mean that the men in her plays are stagnant. Although she does not discuss men’s movements explicitly, Wendy Wasserstein illustrates that just like women, men also wanted to cut loose from traditional gender roles which, as Judith Butler claims, are “shaped by political forces with strategic interests” (164). Acts or gestures, or what Butler calls the “gendered body,” are “performative” (173). Because those who fail to perform their socially constructed and assigned gender roles are punished, gender (both femininity and masculinity) is a performance that requires repetition (Butler 178). This means that how men and women perform their roles may change over time and alongside the politics of gender. Butler’s theory of gender performativity is exemplified in Wasserstein’s works, especially when they are considered chronologically. The ways in which the playwright’s men perform masculinity differ in each play, and Wasserstein connects these changes in gender performance to the social and political forces.

Although there are a considerable number of studies on the role of women in Wendy Wasserstein’s plays, only a few include the male experience. When Wasserstein dramatizes the female experience, she does not side with any group and aims to present reality objectively. Therefore, men’s confusion as well as their responses to the Second Wave of Feminism also attracted Wendy Wasserstein’s attention and she included their experiences with the new “liberated” feminists in her works even though her main focus remained women. Men play an important role in her dramas since they have always been part of women’s lives as fathers, brothers, sons, and love-interests. Wasserstein depicts these men and how they followed, and challenged, patriarchal rules. Clearly anything but one-dimensional, her male characters exhibit the changes that Michael A. Messner discusses: “Men are changing, but not in a singular manner, and not necessarily in the direction that feminist women would like. Some of these changes support feminism, some express a backlash against feminism, and others [...] avoid feminist issues all together” (2).

This article will analyze these changes in the 1980s by examining the male characters in two Wasserstein plays—*Isn’t It Romantic* (1983) and *The Heidi*

³ Wendy Wasserstein (1950-2006) received the Tony Award for Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1989 for *The Heidi Chronicles*.

Chronicles (1988) with a focus on their identity, relationships with women, and their reaction to the Second Wave feminists. I maintain that by examining these characters, more insight can be gained into Wasserstein's thoughts on the patriarchal system and male/female relationships. Analyzing male characters is essential because they reflect the changes in men's lives in response to shifting cultural norms.

***Isn't It Romantic* (1983)**

Isn't It Romantic (1983) depicts the lives of two friends trying to find a place in society as independent women of the 1980s, all the while fighting social norms and impulses to become wives and mothers.⁴ In this self-discovery play, Janie Blumberg is the protagonist who is constantly being reminded of the necessity of marriage by her Jewish parents. Meanwhile, her best friend Harriet is constantly being encouraged by her mother to pursue a career, but struggles to balance social expectations with personal aspirations. The play revolves around the parallel stories of Janie's relationship with Marty and Harriet's relationship with a married man, Paul Stuart. Throughout the play, Marty forces Janie to give up her career plans and marry him. On the other hand, Paul insists on continuing a relationship with Harriet without any commitment. The play ends with Janie's decision to break up with Marty to follow her dreams and Harriet's marriage with Joe Stine, which disappoints Janie as she feels betrayed by her best friend.

The male characters in *Isn't It Romantic* are at the center of the play along with Janie and Harriet, and their presence contributes to the work's main theme of self-discovery. Marty Sterling wants to marry Janie; however, Janie feels uncomfortable doing so because Marty only considers her as a future wife who will serve, not a life partner who will share. Thus, Janie breaks up with him, deciding it is more important to pursue her career than marrying a man who is not supportive of her decisions. On the other hand, Paul Stuart is a businessman who uses the liberated women to escape from his duties as a husband and a father. Both Harriet and Janie, and Marty and Paul, represent the 1980s as individuals caught between old and new values.

Men Who Reject Feminism

Marty is introduced in act 1, scene 1 as Harriet and Janie are walking in Central Park. Marty and Harriet know each other from college, and Marty uses this to impress Janie. Marty always dominates conversations, mostly bragging

⁴ *Isn't It Romantic* was debuted on December 15, 1983 at Playwrights Horizons's NYC Theater. The play was directed by Gerald Gutierrez (*Isn't It Romantic* 76).

about himself. When he is introduced to Janie, he says he saw Janie and Harriet together in Cambridge all the time, and that Janie always looked frightened to death, but more attainable. Harriet, the feminist, was impossible to reach; moreover, he is “not attracted to cold people anymore” (83) anyway. These statements expose Marty’s traditional perception of women as objects to win or lose, and the notion that many men did perceive feminists as being stern, anti-male, ice queens. Also, his statements reveal that he *was* attracted to those “cold people” at some point in his life, but now Janie is more appealing to Marty with her “frightened” passive appearance.

Marty mentions his father’s business almost like bait to lure in the two women. These characters have come of age in a patriarchal society which valued men as breadwinners, positioning women as materialistic individuals in pursuit of economic stability. Thus, Marty deploys his father’s wealth and his own professional status as a doctor to impress Janie and Harriet to reinforce his male power and social authority. He remains dominant throughout their conversation and uses his money to strengthen his position.

Although both Harriet and Janie are college graduates who want to pursue a career before marriage, Janie believes that it is possible for her to be in a relationship based on mutual understanding while looking for job opportunities. She gives Marty a chance, which ends up in disappointment: “Marty, by you everything is much more simple than it has to be. You want a wife; you get a wife. You drop out of Harvard twice; they always take you back. You’re just like me. We’re too fucking sweet. I’m so sweet I never say what I want, and you’re so sweet you always get what you want” (138). However, Marty expects a traditional relationship and patronizes Janie: “Not necessarily. Why do you think I’m thirty-two and not married? All I want is a home, a family, something my father had so easily and I can’t seem to get started on” (138).

Susan Faludi states that men need women in order to prove their manhood, and that when women demand to be treated equally, they challenge male power and identity (62). Wasserstein supports Faludi’s claim through Marty. On his first date with Janie, Marty states that Harriet is not as sweet as Janie and compares her to his feminist medical school classmates: “They’re nice but they’d bite your balls off” (98). Marty’s manhood is threatened by women who challenge gender roles and social norms. On the other hand, Janie, who is a part time writer, is safe for Marty because according to him, writing is not a “real profession,” or at least real enough to challenge male authority.

Michael Kimmel conveys that Jewish men were not seen as “real men” as their religion always supported morality and literacy. In order to counterbalance this, Jewish men began supporting Zionist militarism in Israel, believing that “supporting Israeli territorial expansion was a way to rescue one’s manhood” (200-201). Initially, as the reader learns, Marty tries to erase his Jewish identity

by changing his name (from Murray Schlimovitz to Marty Sterling) and assimilating into WASP⁵ society. However, he realizes that not only is this impossible, but doing so would also betray his cultural and religious heritage and reinforce the idea that Jewish identity was somehow inferior. Marty reverses his position and instead engages in another form of identity politics: a display of ethnic masculinity. We discover he has “worked on a kibbutz” and that he is willing to open a new practice in Tel Aviv because Israel is very important to him. Thus, Marty decides to reinvent his manhood through his Jewishness, and his support of Israel is significant in the sense that conquering territory has always been a masculine act and one that feminists have connected to conquering a woman’s body, as Ynestra King conveys: “In the project of building Western industrial civilization, nature became something to be dominated, overcome, made to serve the needs of men [...] Women, who are identified with nature, have been similarly objectified and subordinated in patriarchal society” (471). This is also another reason why he chooses the Jewish Janie over the WASP Harriet.

Janie’s Jewishness, however, never satisfies Marty. He claims that Janie is not supportive of Israel, but should be, and states that “Jewish families should have at least three children” (97). This implies that Janie is not an equal partner, but rather a Jewish woman who will produce his Jewish children (according to Judaic law, religion is matrilineal). Marty is interested in using Janie’s Jewishness, and Jewish uterus, as part of a larger project to keep Jewish culture alive, and constantly lectures her about appropriate Jewish behavior. He is grooming her to be the perfect Jewish wife and mother and, in the process, is reclaiming his own Jewish masculinity, which has been emasculated and denigrated by the processes of immigration and assimilation.

One scene that reveals the social attitudes of the 1980s is act 1, scene 7 when Marty and Janie have a conversation after their arrival from dinner with Marty’s family. Janie feels guilty about spilling horseradish on Marty’s nephew, Schlomo, and Marty tries to calm her down by stating, “You worry too much. You are just like my mother. My mother says you’re shy and a little clumsy because you’re very angry with your family. But she says don’t worry, you’ll grow out of it. I told her your mother was a bit cuckoo” (109). Marty’s mother thinks Janie’s family is odd, and places the blame on Janie’s eccentric mother. It is Tasha’s fault that Janie cannot perform properly in Jewish society. However, Marty is confident that Janie will become the “ideal woman” and that she will learn how to be the perfect partner for him. To assure her, Marty gives his sister-in-law as an example: “She met my brother and now she’s a wonderful mother, and, believe me, when Schlomo is a little older, she’ll teach or she’ll work with the elderly—and she won’t conquer the world, but she’ll have a nice life” (109).

⁵ White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

Carla J. McDonough states that men feel the need to “conquer” the female body in order to protect their manhood, which is constantly threatened by women (7). Marty attempts to conquer Janie’s world before she conquers his in order to remain dominant throughout their relationship. Starting on their first date, Marty calls Janie “Monkey” to maintain his superior position as a patriarchal man. He infantilizes and denigrates Janie by giving her a trivial and degrading nickname, forever positioning her as inferior in their relationship.

At the end of act 1 scene 4, Marty invites Janie to his parents’ house and the lights fade out as Marty embraces Janie which, in the context of the play, suggests impending sexual intercourse. When Janie asks what she can do for him, Marty says “Be sweet. I need attention. A great deal of attention” (99). Although he wants to be in charge, Marty hopes to be nurtured and “taken care of” in bed. In other words, Marty wants to be mothered and expects Janie to satisfy his needs, which, as Barbara Ehrenreich discusses is a typical expectation of men who grew up in the 1950s and 60s when the social order required men to marry and become breadwinners to support their family. To sustain this order, marriage was romanticized so that men and women believed in the “equal exchange” of work: men would offer money (economic stability), while women would offer services (cooking, cleaning, sex) as compensation (3).

Marty feels he has the right to make decisions for Janie in order to prevent her from becoming a threat to his masculinity. This is exemplified when he reveals that he has rented an apartment for them. Even though they will be cohabiting, supposedly as equal partners, Marty uses first-person “I” language throughout the conversation, reinforcing his position as “boss” and breadwinner: “I figured if I waited for you to make up your mind to move, we’d never take anything, and I need a place to live before I open my practice [...] I decided we should live in Flatbush or Brighton Beach, where people have real values” (110).

Marty is pushy and at times an aggressive bully, and does not allow Janie to speak because he feels responsible for the decisions regarding their relationship. Positioning himself as the patriarchal authority figure in the relationship, Marty plays the role assigned to him by society. Thus, he expects Janie to play her part as well. For instance, Marty assumes Janie can cook because women who were born in the 1950s grew up learning domestic chores: “Monkey, you don’t know how to cook a chicken?” (114). However, as a woman raised by an eccentric mother, Janie was not taught such traditional tasks. Marty’s patronizing attitude, when he discovers her lacking in this area, causes Janie to feel ashamed for not knowing how to cook chicken. She confesses to Harriet that she cannot tell Marty the truth since he did his part by renting an apartment for them (114). In other words, Marty convinces Janie (for a short time) that she needs to prove her femininity through domestic chores. He, in turn, performs masculinity by making

decisions for Janie. While Marty's words and deeds fit the heteronormative masculinity of the era, Janie does not meet his gendered expectations, leading to feelings of guilt and insufficiency.

Marty does not want Janie to make her career a priority, emphasizing that work should not take over a woman's life by calling it a trap (129). His body language also illustrates his controlling attitude: he rubs Janie's back and taps "as if checking her heart" (129). He assures Janie that she definitely should not aspire to a career: "Look, I have plenty of friends who marry women doctors because they think they'll have something in common. Monkey, they never see each other. Their children are brought up by strangers from the Caribbean [...] I have nothing against your working. I just want to make sure we have a life" (129–130). He underestimates Janie's profession and assumes she will sacrifice her career for their "life." For Marty, this is the natural and necessary order of things. He feels that women should place their husbands and children at the center of their lives.

Marty experiences a masculinity crisis on many levels. That is, not only does he feel the need to assert his manliness as a Jew in WASP society, but he also fears Janie, and women in general, who can usurp his power as a breadwinner. In other words, he secretly worries that he is unnecessary, dispensable, and without a purpose. He reminds Janie that he can offer attention, affection, and love (137), but as he quickly realizes, these sentiments are no longer enough for 80s women. Marty sees that the rules have changed—that the assurances that once lured women into marriage and motherhood no longer hold the same allure. Disarmed, Marty lashes out by judging, pressuring, and patronizing her: "You want to find out what it's like to take care of yourself, good luck to you. But it isn't right for me. And I'll tell you something, Janie: it isn't right for you either" (138). Marty leaves after this conversation and "moves on with his life," while Janie is left on stage alone. This signifies that men like Marty will not compromise with feminism, which they see as a threat to masculinity, since they feel intimidated by women who are not dependent on men. As McDonough claims, "one is not born a man; one *proves* himself to be one" (13), a reference to De Beauvoir's famous phrase "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (184). Marty cannot prove his masculinity in a relationship with Janie, so he simply gives up and walks away.

Men Who Benefit from Feminism

In her survey of American family history, Ehrenreich states that the agrarian family was a production unit in which all members worked together. This changed with industrialization as production shifted from homes to

factories. In due course, women became bound to the private sphere, and men were forced to enter the public sphere to work for the family's survival. As a result, women became "parasitic" and men became "earning mechanisms," with the economic stability of the family emerging as their uniting goal (4).

According to nineteenth-century socialist feminist writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the capitalist economics of marriage required men to "make and distribute the wealth of the world," with women "earn[ing] their share of it as wives." This placed husbands into "employer" positions with wives as the "employees" (111). However, by the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, a "healthy" man had become someone who delayed marriage, who did not want financially dependent women, and who did not prioritize his own desires (Ehrenreich 12). This was the impact of the "playboy culture" which began in 1953 with the first issue of *Playboy* magazine. Ehrenreich also states that the articles in *Playboy* encouraged men to stay single in order to avoid traditional, oppressive gender roles as the head of the family, and to enjoy their freedom. They were also encouraged to enjoy sex without emotional and financial involvement (Ehrenreich 47-49).

In the light of this information, the other important male character in the play is Paul Stuart, a married man over forty with whom Harriet has an affair. While Marty represents single men who expect to marry the right woman, Paul seeks freedom in sexual affairs to escape the burden of his responsibilities as a husband, father, and provider. Whereas Marty is far more traditional, Paul represents this "liberated" *Playboy* generation. He is looking for new possibilities in midlife and to escape from socially constructed gender roles: "Harriet, do you know that forty percent of the people at McKinsey are having interoffice affairs?" (101). With this statement, Paul declares that having extramarital relationships is the new norm among men, so he suggests having an interoffice affair with Harriet is not a big deal, as long as it is kept secret and does not ruin his comfortable family life. Paul exploits Harriet's liberation by using her for unattached sex: "You are excited. Don't be embarrassed, Beauty. I'll be wonderful for you, Harriet. You'll try to change me, you'll realize you can't and, furthermore, I'm not worth it, so you'll marry some nice investment banker and make your mother happy" (101). In other words, Paul offers excitement and adventure, but does not offer security and commitment.

McDonough claims that during this era, masculinity itself became the new "problem that has no name." Like the 1950s housewives described by Friedan, these men were also dissatisfied despite their advantageous position in society. Such men suddenly felt "limited, confused, and victimized by gender expectations," rather than empowered (9). McDonough also states that feminism was thought to be the cause of this masculinity crisis, as men felt threatened by women and feared "they [were] not living up to an idea of manliness" (11).

Kimmel also compares the problems of 1970s/80s men to those of 1950s/60s women. He states that the mid-1970s saw the emergence of the Men's Liberation Movement, which sought to address a very simple, but crucial, question: "If men were supposed to be so powerful and oppressive, how come so many men were still living lives of quiet desperation?" (202). Kimmel also conveys that men's liberationists challenged gender roles by refusing to use sex as a tool to perform manliness and masculinity (204–205).

Paul represents these male liberationists and in order to liberate, he exploits feminists, such as Harriet, as a way to escape his marriage and the burdens of society. Paul constantly reminds Harriet that they have a liberated relationship based on mutual benefit to ensure that she does not cause any problems, or expect anything more than no-strings-attached sex. When Harriet complains that he degradingly calls everyone "Beauty" and questions if Cathy, Paul's wife, actually exists, Paul reverts to his sexist comfort zone, telling Harriet not to expect too much from him, and suggesting that she is a demanding woman. He also implies that she is becoming "hysterical" because she is afraid of her biological clock as she is unmarried and childless at thirty. In the same way that Marty degrades Janie, Paul patronizes Harriet, educating her on what she really wants in a condescending, paternalistic manner: "Baby, I'm older than you. I've been through this with a lot of women. You want a man who sees you as a potential mother, but also is someone who isn't threatened by your success and is deeply interested in it. And this man should be thought of 'intelligent' by your friends. But when you need him, he should drop whatever it is he's doing and be supportive" (112). Paul differs from men like Marty because he seems to be supportive of women's goals, but ultimately is only out to protect his own interests.

Paul's misogyny surfaces throughout his dialogue with Harriet. He looks down on women who are liberated, claiming that investing time, money, employment, and educational resources in them is a waste since all "career girls" change their minds when they hit thirty (101). He underestimates feminists and trivializes women who pursue careers by labeling them "career girls." Moreover, for Paul, women like Harriet are to have affairs with, not to marry, and he admits that he was raised in a different society: "The girls I date now—the ones like you, the MBAs from Harvard—they want me to be the wife. They want me to be the support system. Well, I can't do that. Harriet, I just wasn't told that's the way it was supposed to be" (113). Paul selects from a wide range of tropes, ranging from traditional to liberated, depending on their convenience. However, they all have the ultimate purpose of reinforcing his selfish decisions. For him, women are sex objects to be used and discarded as soon as they start asking the wrong questions, demand true equality, or threaten his social standing. Like Marty, Paul is obsessed with wielding power over women, and any woman with true career aspirations is

a humiliation. After Paul disappoints Harriet during their dinner with Janie and Marty, Harriet suggests ending the relationship, and Paul replies by asking if she has her period (128). He undervalues Harriet's discontent and does not take her decisions seriously, blaming her disappointment on hysteria caused by menstruation. Wasserstein uses this final insult to signal to Harriet that this degrading relationship is over.

***The Heidi Chronicles* (1988)**

Wasserstein takes a closer look at the Second Wave of Feminism and the Baby Boom generation in *The Heidi Chronicles*.^{6,7} In this Pulitzer Prize-winning work, she chronicles the rise and fall of Second Wave Feminism, between the 1960s and the 1980s, from Heidi's perspective as "someone who was there." *The Heidi Chronicles* begins in 1988 with Heidi's lecture on the role of women in art at Columbia University, where she is a professor of art history. Wasserstein then flashes back to a high school dance in 1965 when Heidi meets Peter, who will be her lifelong friend. In 1968, she meets Scoop who, together with Peter, plays an essential role in Heidi's life. Heidi becomes a feminist in college, joins consciousness-raising groups, and takes part in protests. By the 1980s, most of her feminist friends have left the movement as a result of the "me era" and the backlash against feminism. However, Heidi remains loyal to feminism and feels alone on this path. An unmarried woman, she adopts a baby at the end of the play, which was criticized by feminists as reifying traditional gender roles and promoting conformity when all else "failed."

Peter always supports Heidi and cares for her; however, he loses his interest in time and focuses on his own life more, ignoring what Heidi does or how she feels. On the other hand, Scoop is always assertive, arrogant and tries to impress Heidi with his wit. Heidi knows she cannot have a romantic relationship with Scoop, but does not keep him away from her life. Scoop marries another woman, knowing that marrying Heidi is not possible as she is a self-sufficient feminist who would not be the wife that he wants.

Feminism and Gay Liberation

Wasserstein not only addresses feminist issues in her plays, but also connects them to other transformational movements in American society. The

⁶ *The Heidi Chronicles*, directed by Daniel Sullivan, was first produced by Playwrights Horizons (off Broadway) in 1988, after its workshop production by Seattle Repertory Theatre. The play was produced on Broadway in 1989 (*The Heidi Chronicles* 4).

⁷ *The Heidi Chronicles* reopened on Broadway in 2015. However, it only lasted about three months. Elisabeth Moss, known for her role as Peggy Olson in *Mad Men*, starred as Heidi and was nominated for a Tony Award for her performance.

Gay Liberation Movement is one of those milestones because it urged change in deep-rooted traditions, especially those pertaining to sex, gender, and sexuality. Like feminists involved in the Women's Liberation Movement, gay men began forming consciousness-raising groups, where they shared their personal experiences and traced the roots of their oppression, which were the same roots that oppressed women: a heterosexist patriarchal system (Adam 77–78). In the 1980s, the Gay Liberation Movement expanded to include issues such as AIDS. Barry D. Adam states that the gay community formed support groups to help find treatments, research funding, and a cure (156). Wasserstein comments on this issue through Peter, who reflects the emotional state of LGBTQ people during the AIDS crisis.

In *The Heidi Chronicles*, Wasserstein examines the concerns of women and gay men in tandem, introducing Heidi and Peter, the chief representatives of each group in the play, at the high school dance in act 1 scene 1. This scene takes place in 1965 when homosexuality was not open to discussion; thus, Peter does not directly state that he is gay. Act 1 scene 2 takes place in 1974 when the Gay Liberation Movement had already started. Peter openly declares his homosexuality, coming out of the closet to Heidi at a feminist art protest: “Heidi, I’m gay, okay? I sleep with Stanley Zinc, M.D. And *my* liberation, *my* pursuit of happiness, and the pursuit of happiness of other men like me is just as politically and socially valid as hanging a couple of God-damned paintings [...] I am demanding your equal time and consideration” (29). Here, Peter equates his liberation with women’s liberation and he calls for (heterosexual) feminists to engage in a second great awakening; that is, to acknowledge the plight of LGBTQ individuals who were being excluded by mainstream feminism. He reminds women that they should not think of all men as the “enemy” because gay men, for example, suffer from heterosexism and the dictates of the patriarchal society just as much as they do.

Nevertheless, not all the feminists in the play share Peter’s enthusiasm and dreams of solidarity. When Debbie does not even shake hands with Peter and asks him to leave, Heidi supports Peter and states “But I thought that our point was that this is *our* cultural institution. ‘Our’ meaning everybody’s. Men and women” (29). At this point, Heidi and Peter unite under the banner of “humanism” because they believe that everybody has the right to fulfill her/his potential (Bigsby 348). In short, he compels Heidi to begin thinking about the intersections, and limits, of friendship, feminism, and solidarity—a dilemma she will encounter, once again, towards the end of the play when she suddenly feels abandoned by her feminist sisters.

A later scene, which takes place at a pediatric ward in 1987, also illustrates how Peter has changed due to the impact of AIDS: “I’d say about once

a month now I gather in some church, meeting house or concert hall with handsome men all my own age [...] we listen for half an hour to testimonials, memories, amusing anecdotes about a son, a friend, a lover, also handsome, also usually my own age, whom none of us will see again. After the first, the fifth, or the fifteenth of these gatherings, a sadness like yours seems a luxury" (66). Peter thinks Heidi's discontent pales in comparison to his, and reinforces this using first-person pronouns such as "I," "my," and "we," thereby excluding Heidi. This shows that Peter, who was supportive of Heidi, now prioritizes his own problems now more than ever.

Balakian also affirms that "although gay and feminist characters are such good friends, they do not seem to empathize with the discrimination that each faces" (*Reading the Plays* 92). In that sense, Peter resembles men like activist Warren Farrell, who authored *The Liberated Men* (1974) and organized consciousness-raising groups where he encouraged men to "listen to women rather than dominate," question the politics of marriage, and ponder the relationship between machismo and violence (Faludi 302). However, as Faludi states, Farrell became less enthusiastic when feminism lost its social influence in the 80s, and decided to dedicate his life to fighting for men's rights, organizing workshops to educate women about "men's grievances against them" (303). Like Farrell, Peter feels marginalized by feminists who are not interested in his cause since they are obsessed with their own. He loses his interest in female liberation, and in the end, focuses solely on gay men's problems.

The Male Backlash against Feminism

The other important male character in *The Heidi Chronicles* is Scoop. Like Paul from *Isn't It Romantic*, he uses feminist women as sexual objects and derives pleasure from manipulating, demeaning, and exerting power over them, especially personally and politically. In fact, as a self-professed leftist, he pretends to be sympathetic to feminist causes in order to attract and bed women, even though he is actually a hypermasculine conservative bully. Ehrenreich confirms that when feminists were fighting for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), men were taking advantage of it and were eliding responsibility by using feminist claims like "pregnancy is a woman's choice" to enjoy free, uninhibited sex (147).

Scoop is introduced in act 1, scene 2 at yet another dance, in 1968. As he converses with Heidi, Scoop is confident, patronizing her by claiming that she has "an inferiority complex" (13). Despite being irritating, Scoop manages to impress Heidi with his bravado, arrogance, and machismo. Heidi comments on his self-assurance by questioning mothers "who teach their sons what they never bother to tell their daughters" (15). Women of her generation were taught to be passive, whereas men like Scoop were raised to be assertive and

confident individuals who believed they could get whatever they wanted. Thus, it is not surprising when Scoop casually asks Heidi to go to bed with him—without any hesitation or fear of rejection— and she eventually complies. On the surface, he supports well-educated women, like Heidi, who he believes should not waste their lives making sandwiches: “She shouldn’t. And for that matter, neither should a badly educated woman. Heidella, I’m on your side” (17). Scoop pretends to be a feminist to impress Heidi. Yet, he also devalues feminism to the point where he trivializes the movement as going “‘hog wild,’ demanding equal pay, equal rights, [and] equal orgasms” (17).

As E. Anthony Rotundo states, men reach the top of social and professional life by competing with women, and other men, and often feigning cooperation or “teamwork” (286). In *The Heidi Chronicles*, Scoop competes/cooperates with feminists in order to secure his position in society. He changes Heidi’s name to the diminutive, childish, Heidella, which is the first step in seizing her life. Moreover, when Heidi declines his initial offer of sex, claiming she can take care of herself, Scoop replies: “You’ve already got the lingo down kiddo. Pretty soon, you’ll be burning bras” (17). This presents Scoop’s tendency to “support,” yet ridicule, women’s liberation, acknowledging its power while simultaneously depicting its supporters as crazy fanatics. Although he is aware of the truth, Scoop prefers to devalue feminism and mock feminists. He also humiliates Heidi by using nicknames like “kiddo” or “Heidella.” Like Paul, Scoop underestimates women, especially feminists, trivializing Heidi’s desire to become an art historian as “really suburban” (Balakian, *Reading the Plays* 84).

Michael Kaufman claims that to gain power, which men associate with masculinity, they must engage in a number of activities: “We’ve got to perform and stay in control. We’ve got to conquer, be on top of things, and call the shots. We’ve got to tough it out, provide, and achieve. Meanwhile we learn to beat back our feelings, hide our emotions, and suppress our needs” (148). Accordingly, Scoop never intends to marry Heidi because her feminism and intellect intimidate him: “Let’s say we married and I asked you to devote the, say, next ten years of your life to me. To making me a home and a family and a life so secure that I could with some confidence go out into the world each day and attempt to get an ‘A.’ You’d say ‘No.’ You’d say ‘Why can’t we be partners? Why can’t we both go out into the world and get an ‘A?’” And you’d be absolutely valid and correct” (38). Scoop is afraid of Heidi because he would be competing with her if they married. If he marries Heidi, he will lose his power.

Clearly, Scoop is influenced by the backlash against feminism, which proclaimed women’s liberation as the new American curse (Faludi xvii). Scoop conveys that Heidi is assertive, successful, and not as needy as she should be, and that her independence is not an attribute, but rather a detriment that will

eventually lead to the breakdown of their relationship. Thus, he suppresses his feelings for her and marries Lisa, a woman who is inferior, whom he can control, and who will allow him to go out and get an A. According to Scoop, Lisa is not an "A+" like Heidi, but as he expresses, "I don't want to come home to an "A+." "A-" maybe, but not "A+" (38). Being an "A+" challenges Scoop's intellectual authority and manhood as the head of the family. Wishing to secure his position as the superior breadwinner, Scoop joins the conservative backlash against women.

Scoop continues to take advantage of feminists even after he marries, like Paul in *Isn't It Romantic*. Despite his marriage, Scoop has an affair with a colleague who Balakian characterizes as a "phony feminist" (*Reading the Plays* 94), and who may be the perfect match for Scoop's phony liberalism. Scoop "is, as he admits, or perhaps boasts, arrogant, difficult and smart. He has the confidence [Heidi] lacks" (Bigsby 347), and he never lets Heidi, the professor with numerous graduate degrees, forget it.

Conclusion

Isn't It Romantic addresses the problems that arose from feminism with a great deal of candor and honesty. Society was not ready for change, and men were the first to react. Marty and Paul illustrate how men felt when the values of society and feminism were juxtaposed. Bigsby confirms that *Isn't It Romantic* is not only about women, for "the men are no less baffled by the world in which they find themselves" (343).

The Heidi Chronicles illustrates that the ideologies and concerns of American society are constantly changing, yet Scoop is able to survive by integrating himself into the mainstream, conservative world of the 1980s. He understands the complexities of feminism and takes advantage of them to secure his place in this competitive world. On the other hand, Peter represents the interaction of the two causes—the gay and feminist movements—which preceded the "me" era of the 1980s. However, he loses his interest in feminism as a result of the AIDS crisis. His tone changes from optimism to pessimism by the end of the play, reflecting the mood of gays who were struggling to survive in a heterosexist society. Bigsby sees this shift as indicative of the changes within American society, which "lost its structure and purpose" in the 1980s (353).

Both plays address issues like the complexity of male/female relationships, Jewishness, and sexism (Balakian, *Wendy Wasserstein* 218). The male characters in these plays all support and reject the strict rules of American patriarchy, depending on the situation. The plays show that men, who were not ready for a change in the 1980s, felt their manhood was in danger; thus, they failed to keep up with the demands of women in their lives while using their liberation to their advantage.

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