Articulāte

Volume 3 Article 9

1998

I Am Woman, Hear Me Gasp for Air: An Analysis of Wendy Wasserstein's *Isn't It Romantic*

Heather Baggott
Denison University

I Am Woman, Hear Me Gasp for Air: An Analysis of Wendy Wasserstein's *Isn't It Romantic*.

by Heather Baggott '99

Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question "Is this all?"

Betty Friedan
The Feminine Mystique

Over the past thirty years, feminism has become such an explosive word filled with different meanings and connotations that many scholars and laymen are afraid to casually apply it to their work and every day life. The meaning of feminism has changed and been distorted to such an extreme extent that we are often confused as to what it actually means. This obscuring of definition has given rise to questions which the modern, enlightened, and conscientious person is forced to ask of himself or herself. Can a man be a feminist? If I do not believe in glass ceilings and gender discrimination in the military am I a feminist? Am I a feminist if I believe that women have reproductive control over their body and it is their right to an abortion? Can you still be a feminist if you choose to have a husband and children over a career?

Such questions haunt the modern reflective psyche as it is commonplace to open the latest book about the feminist movement and perplexingly discover that there is not just one variation on the theme, but indeed several. Today, it seems out of fashion and almost blase to merely label yourself a feminist. Instead, it is more in fashion and ever so politically correct to label yourself a Marxist-feminist, a radical-feminist, a cultural-feminist, a lesbian-feminist, a material-feminist, and so forth (Keyssar 4). In light of these various interpretations, we cannot help but wonder whether a unifying feminist theory and aesthetic exists that somehow connects these hyphenated movements.

Fortunately, a connection does exist and it is partly found in the works of Betty Friedan and Wendy Wasserstein. Whereas Friedan provides an unifying academic theory of feminism, Wasserstein provides an aesthetic outlet. One of the first manifestos on the Women's Movement, Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) supports the notion of a humanistic feminism which emphasizes the woman's right to choose a lifestyle that makes her happy and fulfilled as an individual. Unlike many other feminists, Friedan does not qualify or judge the lifestyles that women prefer, but rather she is concerned with the idea that women be given the options and, indeed, the right to make choices. Thus, her ideology unites the Women's Movement as the various types of feminism, although they might differ on many points, fundamentally agree on the woman's right to choice. Wasserstein fits into this unification in that her plays serve to illustrate the philosophical aftermath of women who have forgotten Friedan's feminist foundation. Plays such as *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), *Isn't It Romantic* (1983) and *The Heidi Chronicles* (1986) detail women's search for independence and happiness in an increasingly hypersensitive and judgmental feminist world. Specifically, through the character of Janie in *Isn't It Romantic*, Wasserstein clearly depicts the current dilemma of feminism as one in which the modern woman is caught in a paradox between feminist freedoms of choice while she simultaneously questions the merits of such definition and self-transformation. This internal debate serves to silence the female voice and causes Wasserstein to call for a return to Friedan's humanistic roots of feminism.

Throughout *Isn't it Romantic*, Janie struggles between her definition of self and the influence of her parents and peers as they attempt to impose their will on her life. Other themes and relationships (Harriet and Lillian, Cynthia Peterson, etc.) are also

Heather Baggott is a junior English (literature) major from Cleveland, Ohio. She is active as president of the Alpha Chi Omega sorority.

explored in the play, but Wasserstein is purposeful in centering the drama specifically around Janie's search for her own happiness and fulfillment. In the course of the play, we see Janie transformed. She begins as a woman afraid to make choices (not willing to accept the judgments and transformations her choices will command) and changes to a woman finally confident in her desires regardless of the pressures and opinions of her friends, family, and the feminist movement. Thus, Janie is a good example (possibly Wasserstein's best example) of a woman slowly liberated from the feminist paradox.

Although Janie is a well-educated Harvard graduate she surprisingly has considerable difficulty in accepting the notion that it is her right as a modern woman to choose a lifestyle that gives her the greatest degree of satisfaction. As a consequence of her confusion, Janie's voice is often indecisive and easily manipulated by both her parents and peers. Wasserstein commented on Janie's silence in a recent interview: "Janie is a character who has a problem expressing her feelings and she desperately wants to be liked" (Betsko 419).

In her relationship with her parents Janie's failure to assert her will is clearly seen. Unannounced, her parents (Tasha and Simon) intrude upon Janie's apartment in the early morning to celebrate her move to New York. Once together, however, instead of congratulating Janie, Tasha undermines her by criticizing Janie for not being involved in a serious relationship. Tasha makes reference to Janie's missing love life as she reflects that when she moved to New York she was both younger than Janie and already married:

> I remember my first apartment in New York. Of course, I was much younger than you and I was already married to your father. Toasts: To Janie. Congratulations, welcome home, and I hope next year you live in another apartment and your father and I have to bring up four coffees. (Act 1, scene 2)

Janie's parents continually harass her about her love life, her occupation, her choice of friends, yet Janie remains relatively passive to their complaints and disapproval. She reacts only by changing the subject or lightening the mood with humor when the conversation becomes too heated. Janie often turns to humor as a defense mechanism against the constant demands of her parents. In interviews, Wasserstein herself has noted Janie's strong sense of humor: "Humor is a protection, but it's a vulnerability as well. I think that may be very female. Janie in *Isn't It Romantic* tells joke, joke, joke and then finally explodes. Finally, she discovers her own strength" (Betsko 419). Through the avoidance of her parent's questions it is clear that Janie is not willing to verbally justify her lifestyle as an educated and single freelance writer. Janie's failure to do so indicates her internal struggle in that she is not yet comfortable in her chosen existence to defend it to herself or her family.

Janie's failure to defend her lifestyle is also seen in her relationships with Harriet and Marty. Although Harriet does not consciously make an effort to question Janie's decisions or lifestyle, Janie feels as though she is in constant competition with Harriet. Janie does not view herself as equal to Harriet, but rather she sees herself as an inferior woman. Janie sees Harriet as a woman who "has it all" in terms of education, wealth, beauty, confidence. In several interviews, Wasserstein has been asked about whether she believes that women can really "have it all". She explains that Harriet is the closest representation of such a woman:

> Harriet has all the externals; Harriet could be a cover on *Savvy* magazine. The girl who "has it all". You know, the person who gets up at eight o'clock in the morning, spends twenty minutes with her daughter and ten minutes with her husband, then they jog together, she drives to work, comes home to a wonderful life, studies French in the bathtub, and still has time to cry three minutes a day in front of the mirror. (Betsko 420)

Wasserstein subtly illustrates Janie's inferiority to Harriet's perceived perfection through small details in the play. For example, Janie encourages Harriet to take Tasha's advice and walk with determination with her chest and head up thinking "I am" while Janie slumps (Act 1, scene 1).

Also, because Janie admires Harriet's strength and courage as a woman, she commends her ability to compete in the male dominated business world; Janie is continually seeking advice and justification from Harriet. Until the conclusion of the play, Janie views Harriet as the epitome of the truly modern woman, "a real feminist" and, consequently, she looks to Harriet to give her the answers on how to become

a stronger woman. Janie consults Harriet on whether she should marry Marty:

> Janie: Hattie, do you think I should marry Marty?
>
> Harriet: I never respected women who didn't learn to live alone and pay their own rent. Imagine spending your life pretending you aren't a person. To compromise on this would be antifeminist ... well, antihumanist ... well, just not impressive. I'm not being too harsh? (Act 1, scene 6)

We also see throughout the play that Harriet's advice is the only wisdom that Janie respects. Whereas she more easily disregards her parent's feelings, Janie actively seeks to live with regards to Harriet's opinions. By the end of the play, we ironically understand that it is ultimately Janie and not Harriet who chooses to follow this advice and remain a single woman.

Whereas Harriet unintentionally undermines Janie's courage, Marty deliberately attempts to make Janie feel weak and submissive. In many ways, Marty is the most damaging character to Janie's self-esteem. At the same time, however, he acts as the final catalysis in making Janie take an active stance on the direction of her life. Marty serves as the impetus that forces Janie to engage in dialogical thought which ultimately allows her to make a self-transformation. Throughout their relationship, it is clear that Marty does not perceive Janie, or any woman, as his equal. As a consequence of this perception, Marty is constantly belittling Janie. Again, as in her relationship with her parents, Janie allows Marty to take control of her life.

We see Marty's degradation of Janie in several forms. He insists on calling her by the pet name "Monkey" which denotes a sense of ownership and control over Janie. The term takes away from Janie's status as an adult and makes her appear as a child. Marty further treats Janie as his inferior by making a deposit, without first consulting Janie, on a house in Brooklyn. He justifies his decision by playing on Janie's indecisiveness: "I figured if I wanted for you to make up your mind to move, we'd never take anything"(Act 1, scene 7). Marty also does not treat Janie as his equal in her career. He can only accept Janie's decision to have a career as long as it does not interfere with his time with her. Yet, at the same time, Marty does not expect Janie to complain when he is on call as a doctor. The moment Janie's job interferes with Marty's plans to socialize with his family, he asks her to cancel her appointments: "Don't let it [work] take over your life. And don't let it take over our life"(Act 2, scene 2). Yet, again for most of the play, Janie acquiesces to Marty's demands and double standards. She allows him to call her "Monkey" and she agrees, with little debate, to move to Brooklyn. She even pretends to know how to cook in order to please Marty. Ironically, Janie understands her weakness to conform to those around her saying, "I am reflective and eager to please"(Act 1, scene 7). Nevertheless, Janie is still willing to continue in the relationship and entertain the idea of marriage.

Beyond her relationships with her family and peers, however, we tellingly see that Janie's voice is silenced in the very beginning of the play before any of the characters are even seen on stage. In the prologue, Janie's voice is heard on her answering machine message, but just as quickly as it is played to the audience, it is interrupted by a barrage of messages. Her parents, Harriet, and Cynthia leave messages asking Janie for her time and help, yet Janie's voice is never heard in response. Wasserstein uses these telephone machine scenes throughout the play to consistently show that Janie does not choose to exert her own responses to the demands placed upon her. Symbolically this represents Janie's apathy as a woman. So many people ask for her time and question her lifestyle (Tasha and Simon pestering her about marriage, Marty wanting to move to Brooklyn and start a family, Cynthia asking for love advise) that Janie shuts down as a curious and passionate individual.

This apathy pervades to a deeper level in Janie's conscience. She says to Marty on their first date, "I want very badly to be someone else without going through the effort of actually changing myself into someone else. I have very little courage, but I'm highly critical of others who don't"(Act 1, scene 4). On the one hand, Janie seeks to gain the courage to become a stronger woman so as to exert her will in contrast to the demands and judgments levied against her. But, on the other hand, she does not want to actively take the time to change her mental attitudes. On an internal level, Janie knows that she has the opportunity to define her own existence, but she is afraid to make such choices because active self-transformation involves intense and dialogical questioning between

her sense of reason and emotion. This theme of simultaneously wanting to both change and not change your life is seen throughout Wasserstein's work. In a recent article by Mervyn Rothstein of the New York Times Wasserstein remarks, "There is a difference between making a choice and really taking something to heart; to be a true believer and live your life by something".

Janie's dilemma is one of choice. If she chooses to marry Marty, Janie is afraid that women like Harriet and the feminists she represents will not respect her choice. She fears that she will be viewed as giving into the status quo. On the other hand, Janie is afraid of losing the love and approval of her parents if she remains as a single working woman. Consequently, Janie avoids making a decision or choice and remains silent and oppressed. Thus, Wasserstein illustrates the paradox of the modern feminist movement as one in which the choices that are now available to woman are not created equal. Instead, choices are ranked in a hierarchy and women are judged by the choices they make. Fearing this judgment, many women (like Janie) remain silenced and, consequently, the advancement of women's rights does not move forwards, but indeed backwards. Wasserstein's solution is a return to Freidan's sense of humanistic feminism in which importance is placed on the process of making the choice, not on the choice itself. As Wasserstein said to Mel Gussow of the New York Times, "Janie has a right, even if that means she's going to be alone. Even, if she's wrong in her choice. Even if she's going to sit in her apartment and cry every night, if that's what she wants to do".

In deciding the direction in which her life will follow, Janie must choose to follow her stronger sense. She must listen to the sense that will give her the most freedom and happiness. She must ask tough questions of herself: will a life and marriage to Marty be a happy and rewarding existence? Continuing as a free-lance writer is exciting and enriching, but will it provide enough stability and income? Wasserstein explains that when creating the character of Janie she addressed these types of questions: "When you make the choice to marry or not to marry, is it about passion, is it not about passion. Is Janie better off with Marty? It's interesting to figure it out because it has to do with how you live your life" (Kohlin 388). As Lillian says, "life is a negotiation" and Janie is noncommittal (until the end of the play) in making a negotiation (Act 2, scene 3). Not until Janie realizes that people, specifically women, cannot truly have all that is expected of them (husband, children, career, education, beauty, grace) does she accept the idea that the greatest thing she can wish for is simple happiness. As Wasserstein understands it, feminism is not so much about "having it all" as much as it is about women having the option to choose a life that will satisfy them as human beings. Wasserstein sees that the biggest problem in the Women's Movement is the external pressure to have it all. She articulated this thought in a recent interview:

> What's troublesome about the Women's Movement is that there are more check marks to earn nowadays. More pressure. What's really liberating is developing from the inside out. Having confidence to go from the gut for whatever it is you want. Janie is eventually able to do that. (Betsko 421)

Janie's struggle throughout the play is in coming to terms with this concept and making a lifestyle decision amongst a myriad of choices.

By the conclusion of the play, however, Wasserstein brilliantly shows Janie emerge as a courageous and satisfied woman. She exerts her will against the forces that she previously allowed take control of her life. In the last three scenes of the play, Janie successfully chooses to end her relationship with Marty and articulates her agitation with her parents and Harriet. Janie expresses her doubts about her feelings for Marty saying: "I don't want to sneak around you and pretend that I'm never angry. I don't want to be afraid of you. I guess to a man I love I want to feel not just that I can talk, but that you'll listen"(Act 2, scene 4). On her own, Janie understands that Marty systematically silences her voice as a woman and an individual. She realizes that Marty does not treat her with the respect which she desires and, consequently, when he forces her to make a decision regarding the relationship, Janie boldly declares, "Marty, you're not right for me. I can't move in with you now. If I did that, I'd always be a monkey, a sweet little girl"(Act 2, scene 4). As Judith Weinraub of the *Washington Post* points out, "This is not a grand feminist realization on Janie's part. It is simply Wasserstein's method of showing that we need to look past feminism and towards individualism. Marty doesn't make Janie happy so she leaves." In this scene, Janie consciously reaches the central epiphany of the

play: she cannot move forward as long as she stays with Marty; she will never be seen as a woman, but always as a girl.

Janie also learns to raise opposition to her parents. The play comes full circle as it concludes in the same manner in which it begins. Janie's parents visit her bringing a mink coat. The coat is a size four and physically too small to fit Janie. Symbolically, Janie sees the coat as more than simply a gift that does not fit. Instead, she sees it as a physical manifestation of her parent's attempts to mold and fit her into a lifestyle that is not her own. Just as the coat does not fit Janie neither does married life. And, for the first time, Janie expresses her opinion to her parents saying, "Look, I'm sorry. Things didn't work out as you planned. There's nothing wrong with that life [marriage], but it just isn't mine right now"(Act 2, scene 6). Janie is able to assert herself with the same confidence that she always encouraged Harriet to display. On her own terms, she is able to become a true product of mother's wisdom as she speaks with the confidence of "I am"(Act 2, scene 6).

Janie's most courageous moment in the play is when she finally gains the strength to express her disappointment with Harriet. As Janie makes the decision to leave Marty, Harriet simultaneously decides to marry Joe (the man that she has only been seeing for a couple of weeks). In this twist of events, Wasserstein inverts Janie and Harriet's representations. In the beginning of the play, Janie is lonely and eager to marry while Harriet is steadfast in her opposition to the institution. But, by the end of the play, we see that the roles have been reversed. Through Janie's reaction to this role reversal we also see how much she relied upon Harriet's feminist sensibilities. Janie leaves Marty because she finally chooses to subscribe to Harriet's notion that women should not fear a life independent from men. Thus, Janie is duly bewildered and disturbed by Harriet's engagement as she views it as a sudden philosophical change. Like Heidi in *The Heidi Chronicles*, Janie feels alone and abandoned by both Harriet and the feminist movement. Janie feels as though just when she is ready to join the movement and become independent, the movement has suddenly changed without warning. She says to Marty, "Do you ever get the feeling that everything is changing and you don't know when you decided to change?"(Act 2, scene 4).

Nevertheless Janie is convinced in her new found strength and this conviction allows her to remain true to her choice, regardless of Harriet's new life style. This courage gives rise to Janie's agitation with Harriet because she sees her conforming to the current trend of female existence and the pressure for women to "have it all":

> Janie: What do you do? Fall in with every current the tide pulls in? Women should live alone and find out what they can do, put off marriage, establish a vertical career track; so you do that for a while. Then you almost turn thirty and Time Magazine announces, "Guess what, girls? It's time to have it all." Jaclyn Smith is married and pregnant and playing Jacqueline Kennedy. Every other person who was analyzing stocks last year is analyzing layettes this year; so you do that. What are you doing Harriet? Who the hell are you? Can't you conceive of some plan, some time-management scheme that you made up for yourself? Can't you take a chance? (Act 2, scene 5)

Janie is no longer capable of benchmarking her lifestyle in contrast to Harriet. For the first time in her life, Janie actually views her chosen path of existence as superior to that of Harriet. In this scene, we see Janie transformed from an individual who was constantly in search of external justification to a woman who looks for justification from within. In this transformation, Wasserstein shows the triumph of humanism and feminism in that Janie learns to make decisions that simultaneously give her happiness and independence.

Thus, through Janie (and characters from her other plays such as Holly in *Uncommon Women* and Others and Heidi in *The Heidi Chronicles*) Wasserstein exemplifies the confusion and angst that the feminist movement has created. Modern feminism has lost its connection with the principles of its existence. The wisdom of women like Friedan, who articulated a notion of feminism as simply the rights of women to have equal choices as those of their male counterparts, has become obscured. Instead, modern feminism acts as a censor and critic to female existence. No longer does the feminist establishment contend that all choices are equal. Instead, a hierarchy of lifestyles has been created in which personal satisfaction has become decreasingly important while living a politically correct life has become the focus.

Wasserstein shows that value judgments levied against the way women choose to live their lives has become self-defeating and, ultimately, destructive. Janie, like the modern woman, is silenced by the fear of judgment and, consequently, struggles throughout much of her life to simply make a choice. She fears that men like Marty will expect her to "have it all". She fears that women like Harriet and Lillian expect her to sacrifice a family for a career. And she fears that her parents only expect her to marry and bear children. Janie fears being trapped into just one of these situations To avoid Janie's struggle, Wasserstein implores her audience to return to the roots and fundamentals of feminism where the choice is all that matters. Choosing to be a mother, a businesswoman, an academic, a professional dancer take equal courage and strength of character and should therefore be equally respected. Feminism began as a humanistic movement and Wasserstein is arguing that it should once again be understood in terms of individual happiness and personal empowerment.

Works Cited

Aston, Elaine. *An Introduction to Feminism and Theater.* London: Routledge, 1995.

Betsko, Kathleen. *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights.* New York: Beech Tree Books, 1987.

Bryer, Jackson. *The Playwright's Art.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

Case, Sue-Ellen. *Feminism and Theater.* New York: Metheun, 1988.

Case, Sue-Ellen. *Performing Feminism.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.

Cohen, Esther. "Uncommon Woman: An Interview with Wendy Wasserstein." *Journal of Women's Studies* 15 (1988): 258-270.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique.* London: Victor Gollancz LTD, 1963.

Gussaw, Mel. "A Modern-Day Heffalump in Search of Herself." *New York Times* 12 December 1988: Sec c, p13, col 1.

Gussaw, Mel. "Wasserstein: Comedy, Character, Reflection." *New York Times* 23 October 1990: Sec 2, p3, col 1.

Gussaw, Mel. "Noticing the Women Out of the Spotlight." *New York Times* 19 July 1989: Sec c, p15, col 6.

Harris, William. "Hoping to Fill a Broadway House? Call Wasserstein." *New York Times* 13 February 1994: Sec 2, p5, col 1.

Keyssar, Helene. "Drama and the Dialogic Imagination." *Journal of Modern Drama* 34 (1991): 88-106.

Keyssar, Helene. *Feminist Theater and Theory.* New York: St. Martin Press, 1996.

Kolin, Phillip. *Speaking on Stage. Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996.

Laughlin, Karen. *Theater and Feminist Aesthetics.* Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson

University Press, 1995.

Manning, Jack. "Wendy Wasserstein's School of Life." *New York Times* 1 November 1992: Sec 2, p5, col 1.

Marks, Peter. "An Outsider Goes Inside the Beltway." *New York Times* 23 March 1997: Sec 2, p5, col 4.

Rose, Lloyd. "Wasserstein's 'Daughter': Thin and Flighty." *Washington Post* 14 April 1997: Sec d, p1, col 1.

Rothstein, Mervyn. "After the Revolution." *New York Times* 11 December 1988: sec 2, p1, col 2.

Scheck, Frank. "*Uncommon Women* Ages Poorly." *Christian Science Monitor* 15 November 1994: p 14, col 1.

Sweeney, Louise. "Wendy Wasserstein on Wendy Wasserstein." *Christian Science Monitor* 30 April 1991: p12, col 1.

Wasserstein, Wendy. "The Princess Brides." *New York Times Magazine* 24 November 1996: Sec 6, p92, col 1.

Wasserstein, Wendy. "Getting a Real Grown-Up Life Can Wait.." *New York Times* 9 February 1995: Sec c, p8, col 3.

Weinraub, Judith. "The Singular Romance Wendy Wasserstein." *Washington Post* 13 March 1994: Sec g, p1, col 1.