

Uncommon Women's Dilemmas in Wendy Wasserstein's Quasi-Trilogy

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This paper is a partial fulfillment of Taiwan's Ministry of Science and Technology research project "Wendy Wasserstein and Her Plays: A Quest for Identity in Postfeminist America" (MOST 103-2410-H-032-068-MY2). The author expresses her thanks to the MOST for its financial support.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: February 16, 2018

Accepted: April 13, 2018

Published: July 01, 2018

Volume: 7 Issue: 4

Advance access: May 2018

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

ABSTRACT

Winning several important drama awards, such as the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award, Wendy Wasserstein (1950–2006) is one of the significant playwrights in the history of American theatre. Especially, Wasserstein stimulates the public's attention to women's issues by recording many successful female characters in her plays. Aware of the impact of the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, Wasserstein describes how the social movement influences women's personal life and depicts the joy and pain that feminism brings them. While the backlash against feminism is saturated in the 1980s, Wasserstein also discusses this anti-feminist force in society to see women's struggles and their awakening. This paper deals with three of Wasserstein's plays, *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), *Isn't It Romantic* (1983), and *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), together as a quasi-trilogy to examine the development of feminism over three decades from the 1960s to the 1980s and to portray the women's dilemma of marriage or career. Regarding the women's predicament of being either "in" or "out" of the family, the paper argues that Wasserstein in the plays sketches different possibilities by emphasizing the diversity of women's life experience and their autonomy.

Key words: Wendy Wasserstein, Feminine Mystique, Women's Movement, Backlash against Feminism, *Uncommon Women and Others*, *Isn't It Romantic*, *The Heidi Chronicles*

INTRODUCTION

Wendy Wasserstein (1950–2006) is one of the most important female playwrights in the 20th-century American theatre; especially her Pulitzer-Prize winning play, *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), solidifies her reputation and turns her into the first woman to win the Tony Award for Best Play. Wasserstein's plays are not only critically successful but also commercially lucrative. Jill Dolan claims that "Wasserstein had all the right credentials for being the first woman in the late twentieth century to achieve commercial, Broadway success" (443). Of the contemporary issues Wasserstein proposes in the plays, such as gender, class, religion and ethnicity, feminist themes always stand out and catch the public's attention. Judith R. Baskin asserts that her plays "have strong feminist themes tempered with humor and compassion" (687). Wasserstein indeed is good at dealing with women's issues, which are characterized by her sense of humor and her biographical references as well (Bunge 320). As a female playwright who grows up in the heyday of the second wave feminist movement, Wasserstein observes the development of feminism and portrays the transformation and the awakening of women in her plays.

This paper aims to read three of Wasserstein's plays, *Uncommon Women and Others* (1977), *Isn't It Romantic* (1983), and *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), together as an inter-textual critique of the development of feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s and to see women's dilemmas at the time. *Uncommon Women and Others* is mainly set in 1972 as the female characters are 21-year-old college students, who are confused about their future and their sense of self. *Isn't It Romantic* is set in 1983 when the female characters are going to turn 30 years old and feel caught in whether to get married or not. Chronologically, *The Heidi Chronicles* then takes a step further to depict an art history professor who decides to adopt a girl without a husband at the age of 40. The protagonists in the three plays are different, but they together represent a growth of a woman from 20, 30, to 40 years old. Therefore, to consider these three plays as a quasi-trilogy may demonstrate the development of the women in the same generation, which is the so-called baby boom generation. As April, one of the characters in *The Heidi Chronicles*, explains that baby boomers are "the kinds who grew up in the fifties, protested in the sixties, were the 'me's' of the seventies, and the parents of the eight-

ies” (216). After the women’s movement in the 1960s, these women, in Wasserstein’s portrayal, have a similar confusion as they are college students. They also share similar social pressure when they come to the proper age to get married in the 1970s and have a similar dilemma of choosing between family and career when they have achieved some social success in the 1980s. In addition, as the three plays are included in *The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays* (1990) together, the anthology also intends to consider them as a whole.¹ Briefly, it is sensible and necessary to see the three plays as a trilogy in order to study women’s issues in the baby boom generation and to review the development of social trends on gender.

The three plays cover two decades from the 1970s to the 1980s, which are a transitional moment in the development of feminism in the latter half of the 20th century. Second wave feminism, widely considered emerging from the late 1960s and accompanying the women’s movement, was particularly popular in the West in the 1960s and 1970s (Pilcher and Whelehan 144). While the feminists’ first wave movement was dated from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, which was mainly characterized by women’s enfranchisement, second wave feminism focused on the liberation from patriarchy and self-control of the female body (144). Especially, in 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded to fight for equal rights for women in many aspects in society, such as education and employment (Gardner 208), so the feminist idea of gender equality has been promoted since then. Betty Friedan, the first president of NOW, was one of the significant feminists in the women’s movement, and her masterpiece *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) explained a kind of feminine mystique which came from women’s dissatisfaction with fulfilling traditional femininity, such as being devoted wives and mothers, only. As a result, women were urged to leave the family, enter the job market, and realize their potential in the public sphere. When it came to the 1980s, women gained more rights but they also felt more exhausted due to working in both the public and private spheres. Thus, the society in the 1980s generated a voice: “feminism is responsible for making women miserable” (Faludi xv). The anti-feminist force in the 1980s encouraged women to go back to the family and reassume the condition they had before the second wave feminist movement occurred.

To regard *Uncommon Women and Others*, *Isn’t It Romantic*, and *The Heidi Chronicles* as a quasi-trilogy may reveal the moment of change in the development of feminism in the 1970s and the 1980s and understand Wasserstein’s feminist criticism of society. Those women, who are well-educated, successful, and so-called “uncommon” at the time, confront similar issues and fall into similar dilemmas, but Wasserstein does not offer solutions (Boles 61). The paper would like to argue that although those women look like passive and confused, every decision they make is “a commitment of life” (Bigsby 344) and by emphasizing the diversity of women’s experience and their different decisions, the playwright opens more possibilities for women.

UNCOMMON WOMEN AND OTHERS: “IT IS IN A WAY ABOUT FEMINISM.”

Commenting on *Uncommon Women and Others*, Wasserstein in an interview says, “‘Uncommon Women’ is in a way about feminism. It is just as filtered through the people who were participating in it at that time” (Cohen 268). More precisely, the play is about second wave feminism, and it records how the social movement influences women’s personal life, and vice versa. *Uncommon Women and Others* opens with a reunion of a group of women, who all graduate from Mount Holyoke College, in 1978. Then the play flashbacks to 1972, when they are seniors and going to graduate, and delineates their confusion about their future and new identity. Although the early 1970s is enlightened by the women’s movement, the social scheme is still full of ideas of gender inequality and patriarchy. *Uncommon Women and Others* thus examines the development of feminism in this turbulent period of time to show the women’s dilemma of being “caught between the feminine mystique of the fifties and the feminist movement of the sixties and seventies” (Balakian 24).

Uncommon Women and Others portrays a group of well-educated college women.² They absorb feminist ideas, which prevail in the 1960s and the early 1970s, at college to know they are as capable as men in the workplace, but they still can sense another conservative force to draw them back to be “the angel in the house.” At school, they learn women’s history and feminism. As Muffet states, “We read all the basics; the womb-penis inner-and-outer-space nonsense. *The Feminine Mystique*, *Sexual Politics*, Mabel Dodge’s diary” (*Uncommon* 24). Besides, Rita likes to quote from Germaine Greer (37), and Holly proudly calls herself Simone de Beauvoir (42). Man’s Voice, who represents the president of the school, expects that college women must see through the fallacy of biological essentialism and explore all the possibilities in their life. He asserts, “Am I saying that anatomy is destiny? No, it is not destiny. Providing a setting in which these subtle constraints may be overcome is particularly the mission of a college for women” (32-33). The voice also quotes from Mary Lyon, the first president of Mount Holyoke College in history, to wish the female students to “go where no one else will go” and “do what no one else will do” (27). Accordingly, the play shows that the women’s movement in the 1960s awakens women’s consciousness of gender equality in the early 1970s.

The play centers on an all-female world, but the “absent” men on the stage in fact are influential enough to stir those college women. For example, Professor Chip Knowles teaches women’s history, but his lectures confuse his students rather than inspiring them. Muffet records a conversation with the professor, and she says, “Chip’s wife, Libby, graduated first in her class from Vassar. When I told Chip I was a senior and didn’t know what I’d be doing next year, Chip told me that Libby doesn’t really spend the day mopping and catching tadpoles with Chip, Jr. She may be mopping with her hands, but with her mind she’s reliving the water imagery in the *Faerie Queene*” (24). Chip’s response suggests that college education is a dispensable supplement to a woman because the most important knowledge for women is still housekeeping

even though they know poetry. It seems like the best future for college women is to get married, better with a man from Yale. At a Father-Daughter weekend, college women sing a song "Saving Ourselves for Yale" to their fathers (45-46). The song shows the daughters' guarantee to their fathers that they would save their virginity for marriage and they eventually would return to the family after graduation. In contrast with the feminist goal of the college, the song represents "a double standard" (Balakian 32) to require women to fulfill patriarchal femininity. While those women study feminist books from Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Kate Miller, to name but a few from the play, their fathers and professors paradoxically expect them to learn how to serve their husbands. They are confused and caught between two forces: one draws them back to the family, whereas the other pushes them to the public sphere. Caught in the tension, Rita, as well as the other women, honestly admits, "I don't know what I'm going to do..." (25).

The play focuses on the last year at college, which suggests that those women are going through a liminal stage to create another new identity. As Man's Voice says, the aim of the college is to produce "uncommon women," who "as individuals have the personal dignity that comes with intelligence, competence, flexibility, maturity, and a sense of responsibility" (7). However, facing their future, they are afraid of being uncommon. Kate is afraid to be a cold career woman who knows work only and is without love. She confesses her fear: "I'm afraid that I'm so directed that I'll grow up to be a cold efficient lady in a gray business suit. Suddenly, there I'll be, an Uncommon Woman ready to meet the future with steadiness, gaiety, and a profession..." (55-56). Kate's fear in fact shows that career women are stigmatized as cold and indifferent women; what is worse is that women also internalize this idea. In addition, Rita even radically declares that uncommon women, like career women, in fact are men. She claims, "If you spend your life proving yourself, then you just become a man, which is where the whole problem began, and continues" (66). Neither to be an uncommon woman nor to get married, Rita has recurrent nightmares, in which her future is always behind the curtain and the audience screams at her (59).

Being independent and self-reliant is not easy, so even some well-educated women submit themselves to the feminine mystique. Betty Friedan discovers that to cast off the feminine mystique is difficult due to the temptation that it provides women with security and a stable identity. Compared with the women who need to create new identities by themselves after graduation, the identity through marriage is easily got. Friedan points out the trick of the feminine mystique, "The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. The mystique says that they can answer the question: 'Who am I?' by saying 'Tom's wife ... Mary's mother'" (64). In this way, the mystique allows women to escape the tests of reality and the pain of creating a sense of self by retreating to family. In the 1970s, those women, who enjoyed the fruit of the women's movement so as to get higher education in college, were seduced by the promise of the feminine mystique and then they shook their feminist belief, instead. When Samantha

announces that she will get married with Robert after graduation, all the other women are astonished at the news. The stage direction says, "Nobody moves. Throughout the song the girls have been frozen" (*Uncommon* 51). Submitting herself to the feminine mystique, Samantha gains a new identity, Robert's wife, so as to release her anxiety for identity. Rita, the most radical feminist figure who even tastes her menstrual blood (37), feels jealous. She states, "Samantha, at least you made a choice. You decided to marry Robert. None of the rest of us has made any decisions" (54). The feminine mystique eases the pain of creating an identity by oneself, and even those uncommon women cannot resist the charm of it.

While the feminine mystique of the 1950s permitted women "to evade tests of reality, and real commitments, in school and world" through marriage (Friedan 278), the feminist movement of the 1960s expected women to be "superwomen" in both the public and private spheres (Balakian 93). Foreseeing their future full of obstacles and realizing the difficulty of being superwomen, the college women's anxiety for identity after graduation grows worse and worse. Man's Voice expresses the dilemma of educated women, "The real problem for many educated women is the difficulty they have in recognizing whether they have been a success... Women will be part-time mothers, part-time workers, part-time cooks, and part-time intellectuals" (*Uncommon* 23). They are capable of doing many things, but they hardly succeed in one job due to the harsh reality in both public and private spheres for women. While the society is still full of gender bias, the feminine mystique always can strategically and successfully tempt women. The play thus explicitly describes their confusion, their hesitation, and their pain.

Wasserstein comments that *Uncommon Women and Others* is a play "about feminism" because it delineates the impact of the women's movement on the women in the 1970s and especially on "feminism's first wave of college graduates" (Ciociola 39). The play articulates the women's confusion, but the playwright claims that she has no answer to their dilemma (Boles 61). The last scene, like the first, is set in 1978 six years after graduation. Because of different life experience, those women make different choices. As successful as with her lessons at school, Kate's career achievement is the best among them. She becomes a lawyer and announces herself "a feminist" (9). Muffet, who at school never thought she would be self-reliant in making a living, finally becomes a capable insurance-seminar hostess. Dreaming about a marriage and children before, Samantha now is going to have a baby with Robert. Interestingly, radical Rita, who blamed everything on men, gets married with Timmy, but she never starts to carry out her plan of writing a novel. Still confused about her future, Holly has not made any specific choice since graduation, except gaining a master degree in history. She realizes that the society in the late 1970s is still "sexist" (10), but paradoxically she also "hates" the women's movement (12). As Holly confesses that she is in the stage of "transition" (71), the 1970s is the decade of transition when the feminist ideas and the feminine mystique are both in ferment.

ISN'T IT ROMANTIC: "THIS PLAY WORKED ALMOST AS A POLITICAL PLAY."

Isn't It Romantic is usually considered as a "quasi-sequel" to *Uncommon Women and Others* (Ciociola 54). Dealing with the parts that *Uncommon Women and Others* leaves off with, Janie in *Isn't It Romantic* plays the role of Holly to keep searching for an answer to her future.³ *Uncommon Women and Others* ends when Holly, 27 years old, is studying for a master degree in history; *Isn't It Romantic* starts when Janie, 28 years old, has completed a master degree and starts to look for a job. The setting shifts to 1983. The 1980s was a crucial decade for the development of feminism. There was an anti-feminist force in society that attacked against many values and statements made in the women's movement in the 1960s. Unlike the 1970s described in *Uncommon Women and Others*, in which women were enlightened by feminist ideas and bewildered by the feminine mystique simultaneously, the 1980s recorded in *Isn't It Romantic* was saturated with patriarchal ideas of backlash against feminism generally. It was a time when the feminine mystique of the 1950s revived and grew stronger as a backlash to push women to return to the family and be devoted wives and mothers. Like what she does in *Uncommon Women and Others*, Wasserstein also examines the social context of the 1980s in *Isn't It Romantic* to see how the public discourse influences women's private life and how they struggle and survive under the pressure of public discourse.

Focusing on Janie's growth, *Isn't It Romantic* describes her psychological transformation from innocence to maturity and from relying on men to self-reliance. The play is about Janie's romance with Marty and her dilemma of being caught in between marriage and career. Wasserstein in an interview claims that the play "worked almost as a political play" (Cohen 266). Kate Millett, a representative feminist in the 1960s and also mentioned in *Uncommon Women and Others*, asserts that "sex is a status category with political implications" (24) in *Sexual Politics* (1968). She uses the term "politics" to describe the relationship between the sexes in order to expose the subordinated status of women (23); therefore, any behavior that acts against patriarchy or gender bias could be considered as political. While Janie decides to remain single and support herself independently in the conservative 1980s backlash, her behavior manifests her autonomy and challenges the dominating mainstream of patriarchy at that time. *Isn't It Romantic* is thus political because it dismantles the patriarchal ideology disguised as the backlash.

Literally, "backlash" is a term "that has come to mean a strong reaction against a system or state of affairs that had been changed" (Pilcher and Whelehan 3). It basically means a counter-attack against a certain kind of discourse. Susan Faludi uses the term to describe a strong reaction in the 1980s against the statements made by the women's movement of the 1960s. Faludi discovers that every time in history when feminist power is getting stronger, the society would generate a counterassault on it in order to stop the possibility of the success of women's achievement of equality (xx). In other words, gender equality and the women's movement have not

succeeded yet, but the backlash claims that feminism has achieved its purpose and finished. This force of counteraction against feminism is "insidious," in Faludi's term (xviii), because it claims an end of the feminist movement and even regards feminism as the reason that causes women misery (58). Through the media and popular culture, the backlash convinces the public that women need to pay the price of their liberation, such as "man shortage" and "infertility epidemic" (xviii), and women become unhappier than women before the feminist movement. Therefore, the feminine mystique of the 1950s turns out to be the backlash in the 1980s to urge women back to the family and to fulfill patriarchal femininity in order to ease women's anxiety and stress in life. The purpose of the backlash, Faludi further observes, is to break women's political will and stop their quest for equality (xviii).

The feminist and liberal values in the 1960s encourage women to be "superwomen" and "have it all." However, while gender equality has not been achieved and being superwomen is impossible, women, with more jobs and stress, become more exhausted compared with the women who surrender to the feminine mystique. The backlash strategically leads women to blame their exhaustion and frustration on the achievement of the women's movement, rather than on gender inequality and bias in society. In this light, *Isn't It Romantic* is a story that depicts the conservative social atmosphere of the backlash in the 1980s by highlighting women's exhaustion and anger. Act One, Scene One immediately reveals how the backlash works on women. Janie Blumberg, 28 years old, just moves to New York and starts to look for a job in order to make a living by herself. Disappointed at hunting for a proper job and feeling stressed about getting married at her mother's insistence, Janie complains about the difficulty of being independent. She grumbles with anger, "I resent having to pay the phone bill, be nice to the super, find meaningful work, fall in love, get hurt. All of it I resent deeply" (*Romantic* 82). Moving to New York and having an apartment, Janie fulfills the feminist statement made by Virginia Woolf, the importance of having "a room of one's own" for women, but she is dissatisfied with her own room because she needs to make money to pay the rent. Janie even thinks that if she accepts her mother's suggestion of marriage, life would be easier for her. She complains, "I could always move back to Brooklyn. Get another master's in something useful like Women's Pottery. Do a little free-lance writing. Oh, God, it's exhausting" (82). Janie, a daughter of second wave feminism, gets tired of an independent life and even wants to be "the angel in the house," living with parents and learning "useful" women's pottery to satisfy her parents and future husband; an independent life makes her exhausted, rather than being satisfying or inspiring.

Janie's resentment reflects many women's anger in the conservative 1980s. bell hooks remarks that harsh reality makes women feel deceived by feminism, and she explains, "Masses of women feel angry because they were encouraged by feminist thinking to believe they would find liberation in the workforce. Mostly they have found that they work long hours at home and long hours at the job. Even before the feminist movement encouraged women to feel positive about working outside the home, the

needs of a depressed economy were already sanctioning this shift. (*Feminism* 49)

Working outside home and making a living by oneself are romanticized, so Janie resents her life and expects a simple life like in the old days. Unlike Janie who cannot find a proper job, Harriet Cornwall, a Harvard MBA and a successful career woman, also gets tired of life. Although she always delivers feminist ideas to Janie, she confesses to her mother that she is lost in her life. Harriet narrates, "I'm tired of the whole idea that everything takes work. Relationships take work, personal growth takes work, spiritual development, child rearing, creativity. Well, I would like to do something simply splendidly that took absolutely no real effort at all" (*Romantic* 132). Both Harriet and Janie feel exhausted as they live by feminist statements.

The ideal of the ambitious superwomen, instead of bringing women happiness, makes women miserable (Braithwaite 22). To relieve their misery, Genz and Brabon find that women have to choose family, instead of career. They comment, "Moreover, the backlash not only warns women that they cannot 'have it all' and must choose between home and career, but also makes the choice for them by promoting wedded life and domesticity as a full and fulfilled existence" (55). This kind of biological essentialism is what second wave feminists target, but in the 1980s, it turns out to be an escape to save women from working. Thus, along with the backlash, "new traditionalism" also emerges in the 1980s. Similar to the backlash, new traditionalism calls on women to return to the family, and it "articulates a vision of the home as women's sanctuary from the stress of their working lives" (51). Both the backlash and new traditionalism provide women with "a nostalgic illusion" (58) in order to stimulate women's interest in domesticity as women are exhausted in both the public and private spheres (58). The sense of nostalgia reminds people of "the good old days" as men work outside and women stay at home (Pilcher and Whelehan 4). In this way, Janie's and Harriet's complaints and their sense of exhaustion get another proper explanation: they nostalgically hope to return to the good old days to submit themselves to the feminine mystique so as to save them from the harsh reality of now.

The title of the play *Isn't It Romantic* is named after an English song repeated several times in the play; the story, focusing on Janie's romance with Marty and Harriet's with Paul, also echoes the name of the play. Interestingly, the backlash against feminism also stimulates women's desire for romance so that they would like to go back home and be wives and mothers. Genz and Brabon comment, "The backlash tries to convince women of their need to scale back their professionalism and rekindle their interest in romance and marriage" (57). In such a conservative period of time, Janie and Harriet have different outcomes to their romance. Whilst Harriet chooses a marriage with a man who she hardly knows, Janie gives up a nice doctor who expects her to be a devoted wife. Elaborating on these two romances, Wasserstein particularly concentrates on the motives of their decision-making to see how the backlash discourse influences them individually.

Between Harriet and Janie, Harriet is the one who always points out the tricks of the backlash, but she is, ironically,

the one who submits to the backlash against feminism at that time. Harriet proudly instructs Janie, "[N]o matter how lonely you get or how many birth announcements you receive, the trick is not to get frightened" (*Romantic* 104). "There's nothing wrong with being alone" (104), she claims. However, when Harriet announces her marriage with Joe Stine, who she dates for only two weeks, Janie is angry with her hypocrisy. Harriet's romance with Paul Stuart, her boss's boss, is doomed to failure because Paul has a wife. Harriet, who now is 29 years old, pretends she is strong without fear of age oppression, but Paul still can sense her anxiety and eagerness for having a marriage. He notices, "I see what's going on here. It's the old 'I'm afraid of turning thirty alone and I'm beginning to think about having a family'" (112). Realizing that Paul would not marry her, Harriet breaks up with him and immediately gets married with Joe who she hardly knows. She confesses to Janie, "I want to have children and get on with my life" (144). Even though the play does not introduce her marriage life afterward, it is possible that Harriet would quit her job, go back to the family, submit herself to backlash discourse at that time so as to release her sense of exhaustion toward life and to fulfill a desire for romance and marriage.

On the contrary, Janie decides to remain single and wait for another man who could treat her as an equal partner rather than as a doll in the house. Although Marty is a wealthy young doctor, Janie could not ignore his sexism against women. Marty assumes that women doctors are so powerful and strong that they would "bite your balls off" (98). He also sees working women as fools who fall into the trap feminism sets, so he tells Janie, "You want to interview at 'Sesame Streets' fine. They do nice work. But don't let it take over your life. And don't let it take over our life. That's a real trap" (129). Trying to persuade Janie into quitting, he explains, "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" (129). Faced with Marty's threat of childcare by foreign strangers, Janie wittily answers, "That's a nice way of putting it" (129). Obviously, Marty, as well as Paul, is a classic representative of backlash ideology that pushes women to return to domesticity, but Janie refuses his sexism in the name of romance.

Through Janie's awakening to her ability of being self-reliant, *Isn't It Romantic* is what Wasserstein asserts a political play. Women being professional and single are not widely accepted at the time because the conservative backlash discourse portrays them as "mental patients" (Faludi 98). Janie wants to have the job at Sesame Street, but being a career woman is what Marty calls "a trap" (129). Nevertheless, Janie claims, "I like my work. I may have stumbled into something I actually care about" (130). Finally, Janie breaks up with Marty, and her rejection of Marty represents her growth from a little girl who desires romance and marriage to save her to a mature grown-up who realizes her ability to be self-reliant. On the other hand, Janie's friend Cynthia Peterson is threatened by the trend of the backlash, so she is anxious for marriage. Cynthia, who never shows up on stage, keeps leaving messages on Janie's answering machine to tell Janie how desperate she is to look for a man. The last scene

shows that Janie is “dancing beautifully, alone” as Cynthia is leaving a message about dating (153). The contrast between them further reveals Janie’s courage to confront the society independently. From this perspective, *Isn’t It Romantic* becomes political because it intends to act against the patriarchal discourse on women in the 1980s.

THE HEIDI CHRONICLES: “WHAT’S POLITICAL IS THAT THIS PLAY EXISTS.”

Considered as the last episode of the trilogy, *The Heidi Chronicles* portrays a middle-aged woman, Heidi, and her confrontation with the backlash discourse in the late 1980s.⁴ Unlike the previous two plays which record the stages of being a student and a freshman employee, *The Heidi Chronicles* describes a 40-year-old professor of art history to continue reviewing the impact of the feminist movement on the different ages of women and the development of social trends on gender issues. Like *Isn’t It Romantic* which pictures the social atmosphere of the backlash in the 1980s, *The Heidi Chronicles* takes a step further to question why the backlash is so powerful that more and more people turn their back on feminism. The play ends when Heidi adopts a baby girl and forms a single-parent family, but this conclusion is not found to be satisfying by many critics. Dreaming of being a mother and having a family of her own become the main targets of criticism.⁵ However, Wasserstein argues, “What’s political is that this play exists. What’s political is that we can talk about this play that’s about us—like it, don’t like it; it’s there, it exists, and that’s the forward motion” (qtd. in Mandl 8). This Pulitzer Prize-winning play exists so that a reconsideration of the developments of the backlash and feminism in the 1980s could widely catch people’s attention.

The Heidi Chronicles depicts 24 years of Heidi’s life from a teenager to a middle-aged woman from 1965 to 1989. Act One sketches two decades from the 1960s to the 1970s and focuses on Heidi’s generation of feminist ideas under the influence of the women’s movement. Act Two delineates one decade in the 1980s and concentrates on Heidi’s encounter with the backlash. In other words, the play also discusses educated women’s dilemmas, but it is more ambitious than the other two plays in terms of the aim of examining the development of feminism in a large scale. Although Act One emphasizes Heidi’s enlightenment by feminism, especially her experience of joining a consciousness raising group, Wasserstein also points out some voices against feminism, which undermines feminism and later becomes a stronger anti-feminist power in the 1980s.

The Heidi Chronicles traces the potential backlash in the 1960s and 1970s. When Scoop first meets Heidi in 1968, it is the time when the image of feminists has started to be distorted by the masses. In response to Heidi’s advanced thinking, Scoop announces, “Pretty soon you’ll be burning bras” (*Chronicles* 174). Scoop believes that those feminists who “decide to go ‘hog wild,’ demanding equal pay, equal rights, equal orgasms” (173) would end up miserably because they would like to talk “birth control” with their “virgin” girl friends, instead of having fun and enjoying their

life (170). The radical image of a feminist is clearly represented by Fran, who uses vulgar language all the time and believes that things are as easy as “either you shave your legs or you don’t” (178). Feminists are pictured as being un-feminine and aggressive; what is worse is that they are seen as men-haters. In 1974, Heidi and Debbie plan to call on people to march on the curator’s office because of the lack of female artists in the museum, but Debbie refuses to allow Peter to join the march. She, talking to Peter, proclaims, “I can’t permit you to join us. This is a women’s march” (189). Excluding men from the women’s movement and hating men due to their biology ignite the war between the two sexes and indirectly encourage the popularity of the backlash in the 1980s.

The backlash in the 1980s turns feminism into a pejorative and dirty word (Genz and Brabon 53). Fewer women claim themselves as feminists, and the society coaches women to compromise and to return to the family. Susan used to be a feminist and to work in a woman’s collective, but now she converts her belief by announcing, “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 passé” (*Chronicles* 226). She even thinks that feminists “make mistakes” (226), so women now are unhappy. Denise describes feminists as aggressive women: “They’re ambitious, they’re professional, and they’re on their way to being successful” (226); however, those feminists would end up miserably because they are “[u]nfulfilled, frightened of growing old alone” (226). While Heidi is invited to a TV show, the host, April, questions her about feminist values. April asks, “Heidi, a lot of women are beginning to feel you can’t have it all. Do you think it’s time to compromise?” (217). Moreover, April questions, “For instance, a lot of my single women friends are panicked now about their biological clocks winding down. Do you find that’s true, Heidi?” (217-18). Scoop and Peter continually interrupt Heidi, so she does not even get a chance to answer April’s questions. In a way, Heidi is silenced by Scoop and Peter; in another way, feminists indeed are devoiced in the 1980s backlash.

Heidi admits her sense of unhappiness to life in her speech at a high school alumni luncheon,⁶ and in order to reclaim happiness, she finally decides to adopt a baby. However, Heidi’s decision causes negative criticism (Ciociola 78). Under the influence of the women’s movement, while women are encouraged to leave family and not be angels in the house, feminism in a way supports women to give up traditional femininity, such as the desire of having children and family. Therefore, because of over-valuing women’s achievement in the public sphere, Ann Braithwaite finds that “feminism is both defined and delimited, and is ultimately deemed inadequate to meet the complexities of women’s desires and lives” (23). Braithwaite further explains, “In the rush to attain equality with men, feminism told them that they must stop being ‘women,’ that they must reject these interests of femininity—in short that they must be more like men—in order to achieve feminist change” (23). From this perspective, what makes women unhappy in the 1980s is that feminism wants them to give up some of women’s desires, such as having her own family and motherhood, whereas

what makes critics unhappy with Heidi's decision is that Heidi reclaims traditional femininity to be a mother in the family.

Even though having a family of one's own is still the desire of many women, for some feminists, family is a place of "women's oppression," where patriarchy exercises its power and dominates women (Pilcher and Whelehan 44). They believe women's liberation should start with leaving the family. Nevertheless, bell hooks observes, "Their devaluation of family life alienated many women from the feminist movement" (*Feminist Theory* 37). hooks asserts, "Ironically, feminism is the one radical political movement that focuses on transforming family relationships" (37). hooks believes that feminism should not deny the value of family, but it aims to "transform" family relationships from a patriarchal mode to an equal and feminist mode. Over-emphasizing the success of profession in the workplace devalues human beings' desire for a private family life, and that is one of the main reasons why the backlash rhetoric, by creating a nostalgic illusion to call on women to go back to the family, is accepted by people in the 1980s. hooks thus claims, "Feminist movement is pro-family" (*Feminism* 77). As a new mode of family type, Heidi's single-parent family fulfills her desire of having a family, and she raises it in her own way to challenge the traditionally patriarchal family structure.

Furthermore, if returning to the family is not anti-feminist, then being a mother is not a betrayal of feminism, either. Some feminists, such as Adrienne Rich, argue that motherhood gives women a satisfaction that men do not have, so women should not renounce what female biology offers women (Tong 84). The advocates of motherhood believe that the problem is not being a mother or childrearing, but a patriarchal and sexist way of education in the family. Hence, the core of the issue is how to raise children with feminist values and how to be a mother with the idea of gender equality, rather than giving up being a mother (85).

Generally, having children and family is one of the needs and desires of humans, so Heidi's decision of adopting a baby cannot be simplified as a surrender to the backlash or the feminine mystique. In light of her long-term connection with feminism, her decision puts her feminist idea into practice by raising a girl in her own way. In Heidi's imagination of the future, her daughter would never be caught between career and family, like her. Heidi tells Scoop, "But, Scoop, there's a chance, just a milli-notion, that Pierre Rosenbaum [Scoop's son] and Judy Holland [Heidi's daughter] will meet on a plane over Chicago... 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). Children represent a hope for the future. Heidi's hope is idealistic, but she indeed puts it into practice by adopting an orphan from Panama and raising the girl with her feminist values. Heidi expects to make some changes in the future.

Recognizing the ending of *The Heidi Chronicles* may irritate feminists, Wasserstein in an interview expresses that she would never change Heidi's choice of being a mother and adopting a girl (Balakian 108). Instead, the playwright believes the play itself is political because it challenges the

existing social mainstream. The play outlines a process in which a woman is first troubled by the social context of the backlash and finally creates a new identity when she is middle aged. As the last episode of the quasi-trilogy, *The Heidi Chronicles* indicates that the success of the backlash lies in the flaw of some radical feminist ideas, which over-devalue women's desire for love, children, and family, and it concludes with a hope for a feminist future, like Heidi's expectation for her daughter.

CONCLUSION

Although the protagonists in *Uncommon Women and Others*, *Isn't It Romantic*, and *The Heidi Chronicles* are different, they together represent three stages of a woman's growth: the confusion about the future at school, the dilemma of getting married or keeping a job in adulthood, and the decision to have a child in middle age. Regarding them as a quasi-trilogy can review the development of the women's movement since the 1960s more thoroughly and see the influence of the public discourse on women's private life. Under Wasserstein's description, women are caught in a dilemma of either "in" or "out" of the family, but they are not the objects that submit to the public discourse, either feminism or the backlash; instead, they are actors, who are not determined completely by social circumstances around them, and they make choices according to their life experience and their will.

Moreover, it is important to notice that the endings of all the three plays are not found satisfying by the mainstream criticism in society, but this result just shows that Wasserstein does not follow the public discourse. The eight college women in *Uncommon Women and Others* at the end have different life trajectories: some of them become career women, some mothers and wives, and some still search for their identity. There is no solution or answer for the women's confusion, and the play even leaves an open ending. Besides, although Marty in *Isn't It Romantic* is sexist against career women, his love and affection for Janie turns Janie's determination of being single a "disappointment" to some people (Bigby 343). Heidi's decision of being a mother is criticized a lot because she "sells out" feminism (Balakian 108). It is clear that Wasserstein does not go to the extreme to blame everything on men or society, nor does she emphasize the image of superwomen as the best choice for women. She tries to open more possibilities for her characters. The mixed criticism of each play in fact explains that Wasserstein intends to find the third way out of the predicament of women.

Wasserstein highlights the great diversity of characters, as she mentions, "I tend to write from character" (Bryer and Wasserstein 16). Balakian believes that Wasserstein's plays prove that "good playwriting is about character, rather than about a political philosophy" (4). Instead of preaching her philosophy directly, Wasserstein values characters more and dwells upon on their confusion and hesitation in the plays. In this way, Wasserstein portrays the diversity of women's life experience in order to spotlight the individuality of women. Each decision they make is a viewpoint on life, and each decision should be respected as long as it is made by their free will. Christopher Bigby interprets well, "What matters

is a growing personal understanding, an instinctive series of choices generated out of individual needs and aspirations rather than peer pressure or group ambition" (342), so the decision made by personal understanding and individual needs and aspirations is what he designates "a commitment to life" (344). Therefore, while Wasserstein focuses on "characters," she allows the diversity of women's choices made by their understanding of life and by their sense of social context around them, not the mainstream or public discourse. Hence, Wasserstein not only records the interaction between women's life and their historical context, but she also emphasizes the diversity of women's life experience and their commitment to life.

END NOTES

1. Barbara Kachur (31) and William C. Boles (78) both also consider these three plays as quasi-trilogy. While Kachur's paper discusses the status of women playwrights in American theatre through reviewing works written by Beth Henley, Tina Howe, Marsha Norman and Wendy Wasserstein, Boles studies all-female plays through the examples of Wendy Wasserstein's *Uncommon Women*, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* and Charlotte Keatley's *My Mother Said I Never Should*. These two papers do not analyze Wasserstein's quasi-trilogy in detail; however, my paper intends to analyze them with careful text analyses and to see them as a trilogy which is a set of three individual works with a center topic on how public discourse influences women's decisions in the 1970s and 1980s.
2. *Uncommon Women and Others* was first performed by The Phoenix Theatre at the Marymount Manhattan Theatre in New York City in 1977. The play is colored by Wasserstein's autobiographical references. Like the characters who study at Mount Holyoke College, Wasserstein was enrolled in the same college in 1967 (Balakian 13). Most of the characters in the play have a real-life model, and Wasserstein in an interview admits that Holly is biographically close to her (Ciociola 33).
3. Holly in *Uncommon Women and Others* is autobiographically close to Wasserstein (Ciociola 33), and so is Janie in *Isn't It Romantic*. *Isn't It Romantic* was premiered by Playwrights Horizons in New York in 1983. Of all Wasserstein's plays, it is her "most autobiographical play" (42).
4. *The Heidi Chronicles* was premiered in the workshop by The Seattle Repertory in 1988 and then presented by Playwrights Horizons in New York in the same year. The protagonist Heidi is considered as the heroine in the trilogy. Holly, Janie, and Heidi together represent three stages of a woman, from 20, 30, to 40 years old.
5. Many critics question Heidi's final decision of adopting a baby. For example, A. Petrusso believes, "To say that *The Heidi Chronicles* is a feminist play is incorrect. While Heidi has a career, Heidi becomes exactly what traditional (male-dominated) society defines as the ultimate female role: a mother" (135). The choice of being a mother irritates critics because it seems to stereotype women as caretakers again (Ciociola 78). Mimi Kramer even writes, "Wasserstein wants Heidi to be not an advocate of the women's movement but one of its victims" (81). Generally, Heidi's decision to adopt a girl and then become a mother is the main target for critics. They think the ending is "arbitrary" (Weales 136), and "Wasserstein had Heidi embrace conventional values for commercial reasons" (Bunge 327).
6. The speech Heidi gives is entitled "Women, Where Are We Going" (228). In the speech, Heidi honestly admits that she is lost and feels "stranded" in such a historical moment that the women's movement goes backward (232). The speech which focuses on the women's dilemma at the time is in contrast to the positive and feminist statement made by Mary Lyon that women should "go where no one else goes" and "do what no one else will do" (*Uncommon* 27). The quasi-trilogy centers on the same question at that historical turning moment, where women are going and how they make choices by themselves.

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