

Beyond Words: Visual and Aural Subplots of Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*
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Abstract: The text discusses the visual and aural subplots of Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* by analyzing the ways in which the deliberate presentation of paintings by various women artists over time, such as Sofonisba Anguissola, Clara Peeters and Lily Martin Spencer, foretells and exemplifies the plot-struggle of American women in the 60s, 70s and 80s in both public and private realms, as depicted by Wasserstein's play. Since the drama also contains a list of songs (to be used for the subsequent performances), the analysis will also look into how these refurbish the plot in a similar manner to that of the previously mentioned paintings.

Keywords: Wendy Wasserstein, *The Heidi Chronicles*, American drama, subplot, woman, feminism, visual, aural

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Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*

The Heidi Chronicles by Wendy Wasserstein was first produced on April 6, 1988 in a workshop form by the Seattle Repertory Company and was afterwards presented by Playwrights Horizon in New York City on December 12, 1988, before moving to the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway, March 9, 1989. In 1989, the play won the Pulitzer Prize, and was adapted to a television film in 1995 (directed by Paul Bogart and starring Jamie Lee Curtis). In 2015, Wasserstein's drama had its revival on Broadway due to its perennial topic, involving the identity of urban, middle class contemporary American women but remains in vogue on stages also in the 2020s.

The Heidi Chronicles is a baby-boomer plot of personal dilemmas combining the idiosyncratic representation of a woman's public realm with her individual life. As Christopher Bigsby described it, Wasserstein's drama shows the "interaction between private needs and public forms" (1999, 349) during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s through the private life of art historian, Heidi Holland and her more open, "public stance" (1999, 348) that is conveyed through her work as art historian. The play sheds light on how the effects of the second wave of feminism in the U.S. have become part of one's life narrative and, in this sense, the play can be considered "feminist in a structural and aesthetic sense (Balakian 1999, 221). In terms of genre, Wasserstein's drama was seen primarily as a "comedy of manners, satirically depicting the concerns and the conventions of a group of yuppies and of women artists," including the issue of patriarchal sexism and revealing "women's loss of identity, an unromantic view of the marriage, and the lost idealism of the second wave of feminism" (Balakian 2010, 82). However, Wasserstein's farcical stance shows that it is more than a simple comedy. Once frivolously labelled a "writer of comedies" (Shafer 372), Wasserstein employs here a complex strategy by transforming her text from a simple comedy into a type of comedy of depth by "seasoning" it "with seriousness to redeeming seriousness with wit" (Bigsby 1999, 330). This wit is present in the play's sharp dialogues, lingering overall this drama that has a complex dramatic structure generating "a sentimentality born of nostalgia as well as an irony generated out of failed aspirations" of which "few writers have been as responsive to the shifting social and sexual realities of late twentieth-century America" (Bigsby 2000, 343).

The above-mentioned dramatic structure includes a deliberate insertion and a conscious layering of a generous amount of visual and music art, which are operative cultural codes generally acting as explanatory footnotes to the main events of the play. As an art historian, Heidi talks about certain works of craftsmanship, more precisely of paintings by women artists. These artworks hold a secondary meaning for the drama's plot by building up a coherent visual subplot for Wasserstein's play. By the fact that these paintings belong to the academic work of the protagonist, the visual art in the play becomes part of Heidi's public discourse. Additionally, the drama also contains multiple allusions to various songs and to various types of pop music of the sixties, seventies and eighties, which further seasons the play's context by constructing, besides the aforementioned visual subplot, an aural one. Interestingly, Wasserstein's other plays *such as Uncommon Women and Others* (1977) and *Isn't It Romantic* (1983), both written in the same period with *The Heidi Chronicles*, also contain a considerable number of musical insertions, with credited songs that are organic part of the performance. Generally, the aural layer has an intimate nature in all plays but in *The Heidi Chronicles* it emphatically belongs to the background

of personal events, supplying the plot with an aural subplot referring to the private moments of Heidi's life.

Music and visual arts have always been organic part of theatre: they enhanced not just the emotional expression of the characters or just a particular scene but also sustained the atmosphere of the entire performance. Moreover, music and visual arts have underscored dramatic character development, set the tone for the dramatic plot and provided indications of the diegetic times and places, moods and contexts, orchestrating onstage reality and helping construct the recurring themes of the narrative. In a play, as Deena Kaye and James LeBrecht write, “not a single word is arbitrary” (1) and therefore, the sound design and musical underscoring of a dramatic text are “determined by specific aesthetic decisions” where “[m]eaning and purpose are attached to everything” (Kaye and LeBrecht 2016, 1). In this context, the complex pairing of visual and music art in Wasserstein's play indicates that there is an intricate storytelling at work with visual and aural subplots accentuating the acted events.

In the following, the present text will discuss first the visual subplot of Wasserstein's drama and then the aural one to see how their combination helps boosting the dramatic diegesis. In *The Heidi Chronicles*, Wasserstein adopts a captivating scheme that allows the subplot to be run on two different levels: the first is achieved through a considerable number of visual artworks used to exemplify the individual and group activism of middle-class educated women, while the second, involving the musical layer of the songs evoked in various scenes adds a more elevated, explanatory context to the mood of the protagonist and the actual events of the play.

Wasserstein's play focuses on women, who are struggling to define themselves in a post-feminist America that oscillates between the liberalism of the sixties and the conservatism of the eighties by reflecting on “the problem of being told how to love one's life in the face of constantly changing values” (Balakian 1999, 214). The play's protagonist, Heidi Holland, is an intelligent, quick-witted art history professor, who, at middle age is more and more “disillusioned with the collapse of the idealism that shaped the sixties” (Balakian 1999, 219) and with how society has managed to cope with women's problems overall in American society. Wasserstein's play begins with Heidi's university lecture set in 1989 on women as art producers, where she emphasizes the actual absence of women artists from the art histories, despite the fact that there were a considerable number of women artists throughout the times. Heidi's talk in Act One's Prologue part of the play echoes Linda Nochlin's 1971 seminal essay on “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists,” where Nochlin claimed that the fault for the biased absence of women artists in art books lies in the policies of art and other institutions and, foremost, in the education of masses (2016). And since Heidi is an educator, she believes that education for and about women artists starts with her teaching. Heidi is obviously still engulfed in the liberal values of the sixties' feminist movement, while her friends, all married, are swept away by the conservatism, “the materialism and narcissism of the Reagan eighties, leading vacuous lives they once denounced” (Balakian 1999, 219). Heidi, still unmarried, feels stranded between various values and tries to make sense of them and of herself in a changing society.

One of the strategies of Heidi Holland's identity quest is to bring revision in the institution of education where she works. For this, she imports into the visual field of her students the figures and works of many obscured women artists and provides these absent figures an academic platform by talking about them in her classes, all lectures with visual slides. As professor of art history at Columbia University, Heidi feels compelled to bring into the public discourse the obfuscated, undervalued work of women artists and of artworks associated with women, a strategy employed by the American feminist art movement of the 1970s, which went by the guidelines of the “personal is political” (Broude and Garrard 1996, 88-103), in other words, the personal layer becomes public to a certain extent. Therefore, Heidi's personal story as a recognized woman academic becomes politicized through her lectures, and her political stance is made personal through her subsequent, subjective presentations of women artists. At least, this is how the plot appears at first glance and, by extension, it is the assumption that the two subplots, the visual and the aural, might keep this pattern.

The Visual Subplot of Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*

Part of the visual subplot, Act One starts with Heidi's Prologue in the lecture hall of the Columbia University talking in front of a screen, where she projects artworks by women, a visual code that sets into motion the feminist ideological basis of the dramatic plot. Heidi is teaching about "women artists only recently rescued for the canon," through various slides, which "are projected on a screen as she offers a gently ironic account of their work," by remarking "the absence of pre-twentieth-century women in the students' textbook" (Bigsby 1999, 346) and making an instantaneous exhibition of these women's works for students. She first presents the Italian artist Sofonisba Anguissola (1533-1625) and her art by focusing on a rare representation of an all-women picture, in a surprising context.



Sofonisba Anguissola "The Chess Game" (1555, National Museum of Poznań)

Source: <https://womennart.com/2018/11/28/the-chess-game-by-sofonisba-anguissola/>

Heidi inaugurates her talk—and with it, the drama—by saying that Sofonisba "was praised in the seventeenth century as being a portraitist equal to Tizian" but despite of this obvious recognition "there is no trace of her, or any other woman artist prior to the twentieth century" in the book they study (Wasserstein 1991, 160) or in the academic canon of pertaining arts. The painting Heidi shows her students depicts half of Sofonisba's family in a painting known as "The Chess Game." The message of this artwork emphasizes the active, intellectual presence of noble girls in the strategic game of chess, a game reserved mostly to men during the Renaissance and a long time afterwards, in an allegory of power play—with the most authoritative, commanding figure of all chess pieces, the queen, in the hands of the Lucia, the eldest Anguissola sister. As Anna Ingram writes, Sofonisba

portrayed her sisters as educated and tactical women—they chose to collaborate in a game of chess when they could have competed against each other. The dynamic within and beyond the canvas compose a masterpiece reassessing the social norms of women at the time. As the artist, Sofonisba made her presence known by including her signature on the side of the chessboard, with a choice statement indicating *she* painted this scene from life. As inscribed on the board in Latin, the term "ex vera" translates to "from the truth." (2025)

The artwork is innovative in the sense that it is a genuine statement on the role of women in power games. Interestingly, Sofonisba Anguissola was (among many early women visual artists such as Hildegard of Bingen, Marietta Baronier, Artemisia Gentileschi, Elena de Zando, Fede Galizia, Esther Inglis, Josefa de Ayala, Plautilla Nelli, Catherina van Nemessen, Lavinia Fontana, Giovana Garzoni, Judith Leister, Louise Moillon, Mary Beale, Elisabetta Sirani, Louisa Ignacia

Roldán, Rachel Ruysch, Elisabeth Sophie Chéron, etc.) acknowledged at her time, but was forgotten afterwards and this did not appear in the main histories of art and art canonization processes. It is quite telling to see “The Chess Game” actually providing the ideological foundation for Wasserstein’s play, because it frames, in visual terms, the feminist undertone of the dramatic plot, by focusing not just on women as players in the game of life but also of them mastering, similar to Heidi Holland, the game they play.

The second artist on Heidi’s presentation list in the Prologue is Clara Peeters (cca. 1594-1657), a Flemish still-life painter the play’s protagonist sees as “the greatest woman artist of the seventeenth century” (Wasserstein 1991, 160). According to Alejandro Vergara—chief curator of Museo Nacional del Prado, who also authored the catalogue of *The Art of Clara Peeters* 10/25/2016–2/19/2017, the first exhibition devoted at Prado to a woman artist—, Peeters was not only a “female painter who formed part of the first generation of European artists to specialize in still-life painting” but one that “was among the very few women to devote her professional activities to painting in early modern Europe” (*The Art of Clara Peeters* 2016-2017). By bringing in a pioneer of visual representation, Heidi chooses Peeters’ (most probable) self-portrait, the one entitled “Vanitas,” to ask if students know this Flemish artist or other women artists. Wasserstein’s drama does not give any directions on whether there is any response to this question on the part of Heidi’s university audience, so her question seems more of a rhetorical inquiry addressed to a wider audience, including readers of the drama and live audiences of the performance, with the aim of sparking interest and personal involvement into the issues of the lack of women’s artists that still pervaded Western society in general and American society in particular in the 1980s, the diegetic time of Wasserstein’s dramatic plot.

Indicative of the drama’s subplot, Peeters’ “Vanitas” depicts a female figure dressed in elaborately rich clothing, adorned with jewels, surrounded by a background of still-life abounding in precious gems, coins, samples of sophisticated jewelry, a gold chalice, rare flowers and, interestingly, dice; all on a background of visible luxury, similar to the context of Sofonisba Anguissola’s chess game painting. However, “Vanitas” is more about self-reflection, materialized as self-portrait that refers by extension to similar women. Moreover, if chess was a strategic game played by men in Renaissance, then the game of dice was entirely forbidden for women in those times. In this regard thus, Peeters painting represents, besides the main topic of the domestic condition of an upper-class woman, a gendered domain that becomes trespassed by a dominant figure, who is able to control not only her surroundings but also the games she plays; showing she is in full control of her life, as is Heidi at the time of showing this painting to her students.



Clara Peeters “Vanitas” (cca. 1618, private collection)

Source: <https://www.artnet.com/artists/clara-peeters/vanitas-portrait-of-a-lady-believed-to-be-clar-aa-CyhDMgOd4FZ5bgLIOgEglw2>

The third artist Heidi mentions in the Prologue of Act One is the English-American Lily Martin Spencer (1822-1902) and her seminal work, “We Both Must Fade” (1869) which, according to the play’s protagonist, “combines in a vanitas-type of painting the formal portraiture of Anguissola and the still-life composition of Peeters” (Wasserstein 1991, 161). As Heidi explains, Martin Spencer’s painting presents a “young woman posing in an exquisitely detailed dress, surrounded by symbolic still-life objects” that reminds her of the “horrible high-school dances” where a girl oscillates between the thought of “sort of want to dance” and “want to go home” but finally decides rather to hang “around, a fading rose in an exquisitely detailed dress, waiting to see what might happen” (Wasserstein 1991, 161) and not being afraid of this decision or of any unforeseen event that might occur as a result of her decision. In the context of Wasserstein’s play, the third painting can be interpreted as a double indicative cultural code that synthesizes the intellectual strategy and collective power of women as presented by Anguissola, combined with the allegory of an assertive life narrative as in appears in the work of Peeters, all through the figure of an upper class, beautiful woman that questions the norms of her society by asserting a liberating thought of escaping from a rigid context that binds her to a pre-assessed role.



Lily Martin Spencer “We Both Must Fade” (Mrs. Fithian),
(1869, Smithsonian American Art Museum)

Source: <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/we-both-must-fade-mrs-fithian-22794>

Further indicators of the visual subplot of *The Heidi Chronicles* in this sense can be found in Act One, Scene 4, that begins with a group of women demonstrating outside the Chicago Art Institute hosting the 1974 “Age of Napoleon” exhibit. According to the demonstrators, many women artists were excluded or marginalized from such exhibitions even in the 1970s, including artists as Elizabeth Vigée-Lebrun (1755-1842) and Marie Benoist (1768-1826). The Age of Napoleon in Wasserstein’s play is an additional cultural code alluding to the seismic changes that appeared in the French society as a result of the Napoleonic Code of 1804 that brought into focus, among many other issues, the principle of civil marriage as a social contract between husband and wife (which was also based on Olympe de Gouge’s rights of women), subsequently finetuning divorce laws but leaving many of women’s basic rights virtually untouched—with all

this reflected also by the lack of women's presence then in the arts. Besides, Scene 4 of Act One of Wasserstein's play brings forth the presence of gay men through the figure of pediatrician Peter Patrone, Heidi's best friend, who wholeheartedly joins the demonstration for "Women in Art" to help women fight for equal representation for everyone in all areas of life.

Afterwards, Wasserstein's Prologue in Act Two sets the action forward in time to 1989, with a similar public lecture as the one in Act One's Prologue. In Act Two inaugural part the lecture's topic remains focused on women in the arts at Columbia University, with Heidi Holland speaking more about forgotten women artists. At this point, she praises Lilla Cabot Perry (1848-1933), an American painter, who had a "major influence in American Impressionism" (Wasserstein 1999, 205), and mentions Perry's two important contemporary painters: the American Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) and the French artist Berthe Morisot (1841-1895). While Heidi claims that Perry "went through a little-known hostility period" (Wasserstein 1991, 205) of her creative life, a well-appointed technical malfunction of the projected slides—due to the absence of the teaching assistant that day—brings in the field of everyone's vision Artemisia Gentileschi's famous portrait "Judith Beheading Holofernes," which depicts the climactic episode of the apocryphal Book of Judith in the Old Testament, alluding to the power of heroic women and their subsequent victory over tyranny. This multimedia metadramatic movement, inserted as an intermission in the main plot of the drama, highlights the idea of women's perennial fight against oppression—and their subsequent victory. Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-cca. 1656) was a recognized artist in her own time and painted many artworks emphasizing female solidarity and their equality with men. Gentileschi's works have been "radical pictorial assaults on gender norms," proving that women can and must overcome "sexual violence, political power, the myth of female inferiority and the cultural silencing of women's voices and achievements" (Garrard 2020, 7, 8) regardless of the times in which they live. After quite a sensational life as woman and painter, Artemisia was forgotten but, as Mieke Bal writes, she was (re)discovered as one of the great artists of baroque Italy in the 1970s, "during the era of feminist revisions of art history canon" (ix)—during the same time when Wasserstein's protagonist demonstrates for the visibility of women artists at the Chicago Art Institute with her friends—, enjoying her "twenty-first century superstardom" (Garrard 2020, 11), similar to the global branding of Fridamania in the 1980s and 1990s surfacing around the works and figure of the Mexican painter and cultural icon Frida Kahlo (1907-1954). Heidi's more or less deliberate insertion of "Judith Beheading Holofernes" between two of her lecture's slides shows that this artwork functions as a "carrier of ideas," similar to the entire work of Artemisia, which bound original ideas of women's liberation "in Italy and France and its legacy in England and America, for feminist activists" (Garrard 2020, 251).

The appearance of Gentileschi's painting is no coincidence: it prefigures a TV interview with Heidi (as curator of "Womanzart," woman's art), Peter Patrone (Heidi's best friend, the gay doctor) and Scoop Rosenbaum (the love of Heidi's life, a married, career-oriented magazine editor, who has been attracted to the protagonist for a long time). Here Scoop monopolizes the screen by entirely silencing the protagonist, but Heidi does not fight back during the televised show. Instead, she decides to leave for work and, with the flashforward of Artemisia's painting involving Judith and her helper, she 'foretells' an end that will not involve Scoop at all in her later life. As Gentileschi's Judith, who decapitates Holofernes and setting herself free, Heidi finally manages to cut her ties with the man she has been attached to first by leaving the show and then at the end, when she devotes her entire love to an adopted daughter.



Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1654) “Judith Beheading Holofernes” (cca 1620, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples)

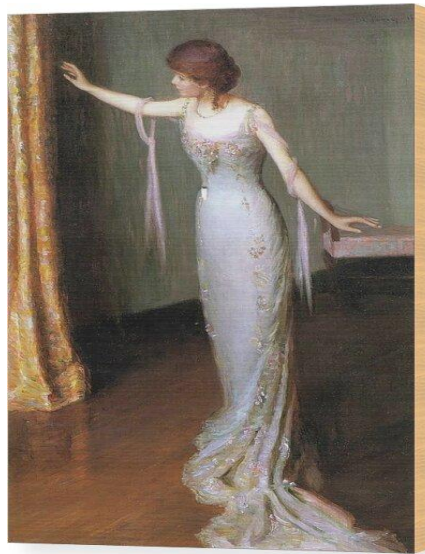
Source: <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/judith-beheading-holofernes>

After the visual interlude on Artemisia Gentileschi, Heidi’s lecture concentrates on two of Lilla Cabot Perry’s works. The first is “Lady with a Bowl of Violets,” which is, according to the play’s protagonist, a transition between “flimsy to flouncy” towards a more “traditional portraiture” (Wasserstein 1991, 205), about a woman that might start to change but remains in the conventional realm of life and representation. This painting represents what Heidi would have been if she compromised, like many of her married friends, and is a meditation on happiness and unhappiness (of which she later on talks to the alumna party of ladies at the Plaza Hotel gathering). Nevertheless, although the poise of the lady in the picture seems static at first, her torso speaks of a nascent movement of which even the figure is not entirely sure, as if moving out of an uncomfortable position, with eyes wondering if change is possible.



Lilla Cabot Perry “Lady with a Bowl of Violets” (cca. 1910, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C., Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay), Source: <https://nmwa.org/art/collection/lady-bowl-violets/>

The other Perry painting mentioned in Heidi's talk is "Lady in Evening Dress," which goes beyond the teachings of Perry's mentor, Claude Monet, and instead of showing a woman in a traditional manner, depicts the lady by losing "edges in favor of paint and light" (Wasserstein 1991, 206), to represent a less conventional, untamed figure of the patriarchal world by exhibiting the complex nature of the person behind. The woman in the second painting stands tall, liberated, in a dance-like movement, all this in opposition with the more passive figure of the first Perry painting. Heidi's talk compares this second Perry painting with the previously mentioned Lily Martin Spencer's "fading rose" and emphasizes that there is "something uniquely female about these paintings," implying less the artistic technique involved in their creation but rather the fact that they both seem "slightly removed from the occasions at hand" while easing "the way for others to join in" their contexts as "informed spectators" (Wasserstein 1991, 206). In other words, these women invite other people into the realm of their lives, functioning as mirrors to the eye that wants to see behind appearances.



Lilla Cabot Perry "Lady in the Evening Dress (Renée)" (1911, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.) Source: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/lady-in-an-evening-dress-ren%C3%A9e-lilla-cabot-perry/bQELYVOUJAIDjA?hl=en>

In this regard, Heidi's—and implicitly, Wasserstein's—informed readers and spectators are ones that know and recognize the codes hidden in the text. Equipped with proper knowledge and guided with adequate signs, one can decode alternative visual messages embedded in seemingly traditional settings. By bringing in the world of visual representation, the readers of the play and especially the spectators of the theatrical performance become initiated readers and watchers, in other words, "informed spectators," in a theatrical turn that is enhanced through Heidi's public lectures. The paintings Heidi talks about stem from her own artistic canon of a twentieth-century, middle-class American Art History graduate with interest in "images of women from the Renaissance Madonna to the present" (Wasserstein 1991, 180) and her idiosyncratic life narrative of a single woman providing a cultural frame that tells (explains or foretells) in visual 'episodes' the events that actually unfold in main plot of the play.

The Aural Subplot of Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*

Apart from the above-mentioned, rich visual background, the aural subplot of Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* includes a well-chosen list of songs and popular music of the post-1960s America, including "Betty Everett, Janis Joplin, The Rolling Stones, Otis Redding, John Lennon, Jefferson Airplane and Sam Cooke" (Pound 2010, 31), which point out specific events in the life of the play's protagonist. As Scott Pound writes, songs in Wasserstein's play work as powerful

“resonant events,” creating a “visceral aural aesthetic with great cultural currency,” making them “integral part of the plot” (2010, 31). The songs Wasserstein employs in her aural subplot of Heidi’s intradiegetic life are popular songs, musical hits appealing to large audiences and easy to identify with. They are entertaining and catchy, with themes related to love and relationships, most of them commercial successes of given decades, which function as effective performative tools of transmedia messages. Music in plays generally alludes to the mood, context, setting and time of the diegesis, among many other things, and can guide emotions by giving insight(s) into what is less visible of the characters in a given scene. In this context thus, Wasserstein’s use of songs is quite “efficient, capitalizing on the informational density of pop music” to guide “to a series of cultural and historical backdrops” (Pound 2010, 31) useful in a more profound understanding of characters.

In Act One, Scene 1, which is set during the 1965 high-school dance, the playwright inserts “The Shoop Shoop Song” as the first melody of the play, which functions an overture to the aural subplot. Initially entitled “It’s In His Kiss” (written and composed by Rudy Clark, first performed by Mary Clayton in 1963, Web: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5lg4lDn-PO&list=RDs5lg4lDn-PO&start_radio=1), this song of mentoring about love became a 1964 hit popularized by Betty Everett. In Wasserstein’s play however, “The Shop Shoop Song” has additional functions to that of the overture. It also represents the atmosphere and the mood of the sixties’ generations of teenagers and foretells the dynamic of the aural subplot in the direction of Heidi’s love life. At the beginning of the scene, the playwright’s directions quote the lyrics of the song prefiguring Heidi’s hesitant love, which will be pervasive throughout the entire play: “Does he love me? I want to know / How can I tell if he loves me so?” (Wasserstein 1991, 162). These lyrics help bring to surface ambiguities, confusion and uneasiness from the beginning of a relationship, nudging the person just about to fall in love to demonstrate the existence of the other’s feelings by kissing the person to find out the truth—all with the powerful line of “It’s in his kiss” (Balakian 2010, 82)—, suggesting that a kiss can give the answers one needs. The kiss indeed becomes a marker of the quest of love in this drama and Wasserstein’s play has three iconic kiss scenes: the first is at the end of Act One, Scene 2 when he “kisses her passionately” (Wasserstein 1991, 174); then the one at Scoop’s wedding with Lisa, when the bridegroom ends up kissing his former lover in a moment of authentic emotional height, promising to always love Heidi (203); and the third one at the end of the play, when Scoop gives Heidi a friendly kiss on her cheek, showing that he understood the end of Heidi’s love. A scene before the last kiss, when Peter tells Heidi that she has “distinguished taste in music,” she still seems to cherish this iconic song, which, at that point she labels “[B]aroque but fragile” (Wasserstein 1991, 239), suggesting that she finally understood its teaching through her own experience. The fragility of which “The Shoop Shoop Song” ‘talks’ is an overall motif of the play and represents Heidi’s insecure love life and her perennial hide-and seek for Scoop, the love of her life she simply calls by the end, a “charismatic creep” (181).

In the diegetic order of the play’s ‘soundtrack’ comes Janis Joplin’s 1968 “Take a Piece of My Heart,” (written by Jerry Ragovoy and Bert Berns for Erma Franklin in 1967, Web: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uG2gYE5KOs&list=RD7uG2gYE5KOs&start_radio=1) a song about a woman, who has had enough of the man taking advantages of her love and who keeps coming back for more, because, according to the lyrics, “a woman can’t be tough” to stop him from doing so. These lyrics function as an “echo” of “Scoop’s exploitative behavior,” while “conveying Heidi’s resilience in the face of his chauvinism” and so, the aural subplot of Janis Joplin’s interpretation “uses blues conventions not to transcend pain, but to scream it out of existence” (Balakian 2010, 85). As a result, “Take a Piece of My Heart” serves as a platform to show a mismatched love and is also a track in representing “the problem of unequal power between men and women” (85) of which the main plot also speaks in various scenes.

Act One, Scene 2 ends with a previously-mentioned passionate first kiss between Heidi and Scoop on the background of the “White Rabbit” song (written by Grace Slick for her rock band Jefferson Airplane’s *Surrealistic Pillow* album in 1967, Web:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vl89g2SwMh4&list=RDVl89g2SwMh4&start_radio=1). In Marc Myers's *Anatomy of a Song: The Oral History of 45 Iconic Hits That Changed Rock, R&B and Pop* (2017), the chapter on Grace Slick reveals that the song was inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). In this regard, the song functions as a metaphor of a single woman and her consequent struggles in a society of imposed norms, with special emphasis on the issue of self-acceptance and personal limits in a challenging world. Furthermore, the trope of the white rabbit signals the idea of a guide in the difficult processes of identity-building, a chaperon who is always checking the time and whose actions are echoed by Heidi when she "looks at her watch and follows" (Wasserstein 1991, 174) Scoop down the rabbit hole of an intense love story.

The next scene to hold an aural subplot is set in 1970, and is illustrated with Aretha Franklin's signature song "Respect" (written by Otis Redding in 1965, Web: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3Itb17PXvw&list=RDs3Itb17PXvw&start_radio=1), which became an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement and exemplifies the power of the second-wave feminism in the USA. The scene shows a circle of women friends including Becky, Jill, Fran, Susan and Heidi, who grew up listening and watching "Father Knows Best" (portraying an idealized patriarchal suburban family in the US, produced as a radio program between 1949 and 1954 and television series between 1954 and 1960). They are boosting their friendship by talking over their love life and singing the classic sleepaway girl camp song of "Friends, friends, friends / We will always be" (Wasserstein 1991, 183), which they quickly change to Franklin's "Respect" that in more in line with their age, mood and feminist aspirations. They have changed and the times have changed, so they chant,

ALL sing along, dancing:

R-E-S-P-E-C-T,

Find out what it means to me,

Suck it to me, a little respect,

FRAN *leads the women in making a power salute on "a little respect" each time it is sung:*

Sock it to me, a little respect,

Scene end with their arms up and the women proclaiming—

ALL: A little respect! (184)

Heidi and her friends seek appreciation, esteem and dignity in a world that seems less romantic than they thought when they were teenagers and their desires are best voiced by Aretha Franklin's song that "blares in the background" (Balakian 2010, 88) with powerful lyrics, with which they try to overwrite submissive gender roles and prescribed behavior roles for young women.

Act Two's Scene 1 is set in 1980, in the apartment of Lisa and Scoop, where Lisa, Betsy, Denise, Susan and Heidi are celebrating a baby shower for Lisa and Scoop's baby. The soundtrack for the party is Lennon's song, "Imagine" (written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1971, Web: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QfgVhE1M6ns&list=RDQfgVhE1M6ns&start_radio=1), "whose lyrics imagine a world free of war, prejudice, possessions, and hunger at a time of corporate greed and social cutbacks" (Balakian 2010, 96). The party members become very emotional at hearing the song because it does not only bring joy with its sounds but also reminds them of John Lennon's assassination, in a time that coincided with that of "the end of liberal values" (96). These women know that "Imagine" is a plea for the "power of the world" (Wenner 2017) to heal itself, a prayer for unity and equality, to challenge the modern social order in which they live. In a moment of anagnorisis, Susan quickly takes the record off and all women decide to put on a different song, wanting instead "something snappy" (Wasserstein 1991, 207) to remind them of happier days, such as the "Rocky Raccoon" song (written by Paul McCartney and John Lennon for *The Beatles* album in 1968, Web: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqA4ZiQaGtU&list=RDqqA4ZiQaGtU&start_radio=1), "It's Been a Hard Day's Night" (written by Paul McCartney and John Lennon in 1964, Web: <https://www.youtube.com/>

[watch?v=Yyjj8qnqkYI&list=RDYyjj8qnqkYI&start_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yyjj8qnqkYI&list=RDYyjj8qnqkYI&start_radio=1)) and “Here Comes the Sun” (written by George Harrison in 1969 for the *Abbey Road* album of The Beatles, Web: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fzJVJZbVSk&list=RD9fzJVJZbVSk&start_radio=1), all Beatles songs, but the change of music does not materialize. Instead, they return to listen to that very record of “Imagine” that plays at the end of the scene, with Heidi reconciling with Lisa by putting her arm on the mother-to-be.

The penultimate scene of the play does not have a proper ‘soundtrack.’ Instead, the scene surfaces the Heidi’s music canon with list of records. She is giving away her book and record collection to Peter’s Pediatric Department and plans to move out of New York to find a new life. Peter goes around Heidi’s boxes and finds the records of many iconic representatives of the 1960s counterculture music scene, such as The Mamas and the Papas, Gerry and the Pacemakers, Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs, Theodore Meir Bikel (Wasserstein 1991, 236) along with those of Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels, Garry Puckett and the Union Gap, Ricky Nelson and the Rocky Fellers (238). At the sight of such cultural markers, he does not wonder any more on how did they become and remained close, true friends, since these records and the books she gives away are markers of her personal cultural identity with which Peter can also identify.

Act One, Scene 5 presents the wedding of Scoop and Lisa Friedlander in 1977, where Heidi is accompanied by her gay friend, Peter. The wedding ballroom echoes of a horah music (used for the traditional Eastern European Jewish circle dances), which changes towards the end to the favorite song of the bride and bridegroom, Sam Cooke’s “You Send Me” (written by Sam Cooke and issued in 1957 by Keen Records, Web: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=85ekOXs1-7k&list=RD85ekOXs1-7k&start_radio=1). Initially inserted to showcase the commitment of the marrying couple, “You Send Me” ends up reflecting the enduring thrill of the two people who are enamored: Heidi and Scoop. They even give an A+ for the content and form of the song, as if rating their love through the music and lyrics, all to superlative levels (Wasserstein 1991, 203). While the song goes on, Heidi and Scoop “look at each other,” and then “simultaneously move towards each other and kiss” slow-dancing while the music lasts (203). In terms of the song, the scene turns into a symbolic union of two people genuinely in love but who do not commit to each other, however still keeping their admiration for the years to come. And although Scoop marries another woman, Heidi knows that their love persists, when Scoop finally confesses his perennial affection to her. In the context of the aural subplot of the play, Sam Cooke’s song remains a lingering shadow to accompany Heidi until the end of the play, when she adopts a baby girl, Judy, and becomes a single mother. In the last scene of the drama, Heidi

sits alone in her empty new apartment rocking her adopted baby as the light floods from the left. She no longer feels “stranded;” she has made her peace with the sense of betrayal that nearly did her in, and is looking forward to a bright future, if not for her then for her daughter.” (Bishop 1991, xi)

At this point, Scoop visits her to see what has become of their love. Heidi’s and Scoop’s words and deeds reveal that their bond has been tamed to a sincere friendship:

HEIDI: It’s nice to see you. *Pats his arm as a friend.* I have absolutely no idea why Lisa stays married to you.

SCOOP: You would have married me.

HEIDI: But I wouldn’t have stayed married to you.

SCOOP: Good thing I am married to Lisa.

HEIDI: Yup. Good thing. (Wasserstein 1991, 244).

The play ends in Heidi sitting in the rocker and softly singing, “adding her own spirited high and low harmonies,” Cooke’s song: “Darling you send me. / You send me. / Honest you do, honest you do, honest you do” (Wasserstein 1991, 248), giving the song a new meaning in her novel posture of mother—and not that of a lover, with which she excludes Scoop from her emotional

life. This exclusion is illustrated with the final image of the play with Heidi “triumphantly holding Judy in front of a museum banner for a Georgia O’Keefe retrospective” (249), a powerful image suggesting that her life and love as mother fused with her life as art historian, projecting the idea that her private life merges with her public stance in a meaningful, organic way.

The Confluence of Subplots in Wendy Wasserstein’s *The Heidi Chronicles*

As shown above, the visual subplot of Wasserstein’s drama focuses on women as agents of power in their given contexts, with emphasis on the domestic or private and non-domestic or public context. In many of the visual examples Wasserstein uses as subplots of her drama, the ambience and connections reflect the private realm of women generally and Heidi in particular, such as Clara Peeters’ “Vanitas” and Lilla Cabot Perry’s “Lady with a Bowl of Violets.” This ‘privacy’ gradually shifts from a closeted context toward the margins of the public domain as is the case of Sofonisba Anguissola’s “The Chess Game” and Artemisia Gentileschi’s “Judith Beheading Holofernes,” to arrive on the brink of the public territory portrayed by the figures of Lilla Cabot Perry “Lady in the Evening Dress” and Lilly Martin Spencer’s “We Both Must Fade.” The use of paintings to append the main dramatic plot is not only appropriate but very useful because it adds not only an aesthetic dimension to the text but also elevates the drama to an academic context imbued with ideological overtones. As art historian, Heidi can and does exhibit her artistic, academic dimension through the paintings she chooses to discuss and present and which show her personal artistic canon. As a result, the function of the visual subplot of the drama is to strengthen the plot of Heidi’s identity construction as a successful academic and as visual activist by her promoting artworks of women. As such, the play’s protagonist does not need to confine to marriage for her societal success; her status in the public realm is secured with her work as a university professor, activist and art curator. And by introducing, presenting and disseminating the artworks of women painters, she acts as a model, enabling other women to enter, inhabit and master the public realm as art makers, curators, teachers, activists and other areas as well.

Besides the visual subplot, the aural subplot of Wasserstein’s drama provides another crucial set of codes to support and bolster the main plot line, which is the life story of an academic in love. While the visual subplot of this play puts a robust emphasis on the theme of women’s liberation, the aural subplot is mixed in this regard and centers primarily on songs about personal feelings of love, with only one example of a musical item focusing less on love than on gender equality in relationships, namely Aretha Franklin’s “Respect.” Popular music is a mass consumed art form, so it is inherently made for the public sphere. While paintings are essentially privately conceived and only moderately ‘consumed’ in masses, popular songs are mostly team-produced and mass-consumed, a fact that highlights their fundamental public character. However, as in many other cases, in *The Heidi Chronicles* the songs accompanying scenes are generally tied to private emotions, reflecting the intimate sphere of the protagonist and endorse the private field of Heidi’s world, as opposed to the visual subplot, which, inherently private in its inception, promotes a public dimension in this text.

Overall, the visual and the aural plot provide parallel support for the dramatic structure of Wasserstein’s play, which develops around the milestone events of Heidi’s private life, revealed in her fight for individual freedom and love and exemplified by the songs she is surrounded with and her public sphere, reflected by her involvement in women’s liberation movement and her career as an art historian reflected by the paintings she uses to talk about. It seems that despite there is a subtle proportion established between the two subplots regarding the ratio of the private and public dimensions: while the academic facet of Heidi’s life assists the a public realm of the private character, the inherently public aural subplot of the drama concentrates mostly on the private world of the protagonist, a dynamic that boosts the plot of Heidi’s successful identity construction in both areas, public, as a successful academic and private, as single mother.

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