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10 “Marriages are just performances”: Staging Fashion, Comedy, and Feminism in *Love, Loss and What I Wore*

“All mothers want their daughters to get married.
To most mothers, a daughter in a marriage that’s just okay
is better than a daughter who’s single and happy.”

– Ilene Beckerman

Mother of the Bride: The Dream, the Reality, the Search for a Perfect Dress (2000)¹

The trajectories of white middle-class American women’s lives underwent a radical revision in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. No longer were they necessarily pointed toward heterosexual marriage; no longer were they expected to end in the domestic sphere. As a reflection of these changing conditions, literary works issued by the mainstream publishing world offered numerous expressions of dissident social and sexual attitudes, including exposés of marriage as an oppressive, patriarchal institution. Pro-marriage texts, however, especially those making arguments for marriage on grounds related to reasons other than romance, by no means vanished from the scene; instead, they assumed new forms. As this study will suggest by focusing on one such text in two different versions—the first an illustrated memoir by Ilene Beckerman; the second a play-script by Nora and Delia Ephron, created over a decade later—they took aim at a middlebrow, mass-market, and largely female audience, employing comic irony for its ability to entertain, sentimental representations of familial bonds for their emotional effect, and an emphasis on fashion for its power to draw in and draw together women readers and spectators. In doing so, they reshaped the rationale for marriage, presenting it as an institution redeemed by its potential to connect women with one another.

¹ Ilene Beckerman, *Mother of the Bride: The Dream, the Reality, the Search for a Perfect Dress* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2000), 1.

Love, Loss, and What I Wore: A Commercial Phenomenon

With no history of authorship and no training as an artist, Ilene Beckerman (b. 1935, née Ilene Edelstein) surprised the American publishing industry in 1995 with the success of her bestselling illustrated memoir, *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*. Almost everything about it was unusual. Compact in size (13 x 17 cm) and relatively brief in length (140 pp.), it employed a distinctive format, with each left-hand page containing a short text (in some cases, comprising as few as 10 to 30 words) and each facing page offering a simple, almost crude line drawing of a clothed figure that was, in most cases, a representation of Beckerman herself at different ages. The narrative charted her progress through the stages of her life, each one of which was tied to a specific item of dress that Beckerman both described and drew from memory, as she traced her history as a middle-class Jewish woman growing up in New York City and its suburbs.

Most of the final third of the book, however, was dedicated to the subject of the clothes associated with her two failed marriages. Surprisingly, neither union had begun with the bride in the sort of white gown that usually featured in weddings of the 1950s and 1960s—at least in the case of first marriages—and equally surprisingly, both had ended in divorces that Beckerman herself appeared to have initiated. The memoir concluded, nonetheless, with the author describing her contentment in domestic terms, as having had the satisfaction of attending the weddings of two daughters and, at age sixty, of enjoying sessions of dressing up with her four-year-old granddaughter, using a drawer filled with cosmetics and boxes of clothes preserved from her own younger years. Although the dust-jacket copy identified Beckerman as the vice-president of an advertising agency, there was no mention of this career within the text itself; everything focused instead upon personal relations, and especially on familial ones, as her source of identity and pride.

Throughout Beckerman's memoir, the tone of the prose was witty and understated, with frequent comic touches that were often dry to the point of being acerbic. This was particularly true when the subject at hand was one of the writer's two unhappy marriages. (*Love, Loss, and What I Wore* did not cover the period of her third, later-in-life marriage.) The narrative's ending, however, underlined a sentimental strain, emphasizing the satisfactions of continuity in family life and the rewards of an intergenerational sharing—but only through the maternal line—of pleasure in dress, as expressed in the author's delight as her granddaughter adorned herself in traditionally feminine garments. In this way, Beckerman's was a nostalgic, if not retrograde text. Indeed, it was almost a

throwback, in terms of its heteronormative assumptions and embrace of conventional ideas of gender and gendered roles, to the earlier historical eras, from the 1940s onward, that it recorded through a personal lens. Beckerman’s was a fondly remembered world of Girl Scout troops, ballet classes, proms and other school dances, and occasional outings to the “ladies” sections of New York department stores.

Arriving in the mid-1990s, a time when American women had made enormous gains in legal status, dramatic changes in their expressions of gender, and explorations of diverse sexualities, *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, despite or perhaps because of its somewhat dated perspective, proved an unexpected hit. It was curiously popular from the first, accruing huge amounts of publicity for its author and large profits for Algonquin Books, its publisher. It spawned, moreover, a raft of follow-up texts by Beckerman, all in a similar pocket-sized format and with the same combination of sparse text and her own deliberately amateurish line drawings. These included *What We Do for Love* (1997), a reflection on the men at the center of her disappointing romances and marriages; *Mother of the Bride* (2000), an account of the elaborate planning undertaken for her eldest daughter’s wedding; *Makeovers at the Beauty Counter of Happiness* (2005), a meditation on her youth occasioned by anxiety over an upcoming reunion of her single-sex high-school class; and *The Smartest Woman I Know* (2011), a tribute to the grandmother who had raised both her and her sister, following the death of their mother and abandonment by their father. Each volume affirmed the importance of family life to women, in particular, and of the married state both as a necessary prelude to reproduction and a guarantor of continuity, regardless of whether some marriages turned out badly.

If the 1990s was the decade of “zines”—i.e., of deliberately non-professional-seeming and individualistic publishing ventures with a handcrafted aesthetic—*Love, Loss, and What I Wore* had the look of a related phenomenon; yet, in terms of its implicit ideology, it was an anti-zine and perhaps even a sign of backlash. Whereas American zine productions were often connected to the radical feminist movements of the so-called “riot grrrls” [sic] and committed to disruption of the gendered social order,² Ilene Beckerman’s 1997 memoir represented the antithesis of such revolutionary aims. It celebrated white middle-class social ambitions, the pleasure of capitalistic acquisitions of material goods (literally) in the form of dresses and other objects associated with the fashion industry, and the satisfactions available to women within the frameworks of moth-

2 Caroline K. Kaltefleiter, “Start Your Own Revolution: Agency and Action of the Riot Grrrl Network,” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 36, no. 11/12 (2016): 808–823.

erhood and grandmotherhood—all made possible by heterosexual marriages, even after such marriages ended.

So popular with the mainstream American reading public did *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* become that, soon after its release in 1995, it was optioned by the Hollywood screenwriter/director Nora Ephron (1941–2012) and her sister Delia Ephron (b. 1944), both of whom were specialists in comedies about the lives of women. Their goal was not to turn it into a film, however, but a play, yet a funny thing happened, so to speak, on the way to the theater. A long delay occurred in the adaptation of the original text, allowing for and even necessitating other kinds of transformation by the time of its first production in 2008.

If Beckerman's memoir embodied a belated response to and in some respects a reaction against Second Wave feminism, the Ephrons' dramatization showed signs of the positive influence of Third Wave feminism. Even as they incorporated elements of that movement, however, the Ephron sisters mainstreamed it by stripping some of its more challenging elements and rendering it more palatable for a middlebrow playgoing public. In the process, they also recuperated the notion of marriage for their 21st-century audience, going further than Beckerman had to remove it from the sphere of heterosexual romance and to recast it as an institution that cemented and celebrated relations between and among women instead. When late in the play a wedding dress appeared as one of the featured items of clothing, it was in a section titled "Brides," in plural form, because the marriage was that of two lesbians.

Marriage and American Second Wave Feminism

In the title work from *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems from 1954–1962*, the groundbreaking volume that in 1963 helped to introduce Second Wave feminism to American literature, Adrienne Rich (1929–2012) depicted dresses in general and the mementos associated with bridal wear at heterosexual weddings in particular as oppressive trappings—literally, as emblems of the *entrapment* of middle-class white women. The older female figure in Rich's poem, lost in nostalgia, her "mind ... moldering like wedding-cake," has her new clothes made on the pattern of those worn in the days before her marriage, when she still had social value. Meanwhile, the younger female speaker thinks bitterly of "mildewed

orange flowers,"³ meaning the traditional orange blossoms featured at weddings ever since Queen Victoria's marriage to Prince Albert in the mid-19th century.⁴ These rotting floral decorations are part of the "commodious/steamer-trunk of tempora and mores" that have been conflated with ideas of what is natural and necessary for all women—a code of unwritten but seemingly inescapable social laws.⁵ As the critic Maggie Doherty has put the matter, "The poem is decidedly feminine, replete with images uniquely horrifying to women readers," fusing reminders of domesticity and marital life with "burdens" and "enclosures," even as it drives toward the possibility of "escape."⁶

Almost simultaneously in 1963, the social critic Betty Friedan (1921–2006) published *The Feminine Mystique* and famously opened her polemic with a chapter titled "The Problem That Has No Name." By this, she meant a deep "dissatisfaction" with their restriction to the domestic sphere that an entire post-Second World War generation of white, middle-class, heterosexual women in the U.S. had felt but had been forced to suppress.⁷ Even as this sense of unfulfillment, frustration, and despair spread silently, the number of women who succumbed to the pressure to become "housewives" grew: "By the end of the nineteen-fifties, the average marriage age of women in America dropped to 20, and was still dropping, into the teens. Fourteen million girls were engaged by 17."⁸

Interestingly, Friedan linked this closing of horizons and elimination of any alternatives to heterosexual marriage for women to the subject of the clothed body and to deliberate efforts to reduce the space that it occupied. As she noted, women in the early 1960s were consuming a diet drink "called Metrecal, instead of food, to shrink to the size of the thin young models. Department-store buyers reported that American women, since 1939, had become three and four sizes smaller. 'Women are out to fit the clothes, instead of vice-versa,' one buyer said."⁹ At the same time, what Adrienne Rich would later term "compulsory heterosexuality" and with it the drive toward marriage was being imposed on

3 Adrienne Rich, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," accessed November 28, 2020, <https://genius.com/Adrienne-rich-snapshots-of-a-daughter-in-law-annotated>.

4 Katie Frost, "The One Royal Wedding Tradition You Probably Never Knew About," *Good Housekeeping*, November 5, 2018, <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/uk/news/a577089/orange-blossom-royal-wedding-brides/>.

5 Rich, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law."

6 Maggie Doherty, "Look at Me Now: The Evolution of Adrienne Rich," *New Yorker*, November 30, 2020, 84.

7 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963), 15.

8 *Ibid.*, 16.

9 *Ibid.*, 17.

girls at ever younger ages and often associated with items of clothing.¹⁰ Friedan cited, in *The Feminine Mystique*, a 1960 “advertisement for a child’s dress, sizes 3–6x” from the *New York Times* that featured these words, meant to appeal to the parents of primary school-aged daughters: “She Too Can Join the Man-Trap Set.”¹¹

By the mid-1960s, the discontent articulated by Friedan’s book had fueled a resolve among many of its readers to move from individual recognition of “The Problem” to organized protests on a large scale. These were directed against both the social attitudes that relegated women’s energies to so-called “full-time home-making” and the legal limitations on their rights that underpinned the insistence upon marriage-and-motherhood as women’s sole approved social function. A new spirit of activism, identified as Second Wave feminism, soon appeared in the U.S., and it spread across the lines of race, class, and sexual orientation. In 1966, it resulted in the founding of the National Organization for Women, a.k.a. “NOW.” It would also generate actions ranging from the reintroduction in Congress of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1971 to the creation in 1972 of *Ms.*, a mass-market periodical edited by the journalist and activist Gloria Steinem (b. 1934) that combined feminist politics with works drawn from across the arts. The magazine’s title, moreover, enshrined an effort to eliminate from official governmental forms and from informal discourse alike the use of honorifics such as “Mrs.” and “Miss” that automatically labeled all women—and only women—according to marital status. At the same time, Second Wave feminists of the late 1960s and 1970s recognized the linkage between liberation and clothing, advocating for their right to wear trousers, rather than skirts, in venues ranging from research libraries, to courts of law, to the floor of the U.S. Congress.¹²

Many thousands, and eventually millions, of American women either participated actively in political initiatives or gave support through their membership in feminist organizations and subscriptions to feminist periodicals. Countless others benefited both directly and indirectly, as they took advantage of the oppor-

10 See Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 631–660.

11 Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 16.

12 For more about this important period of social change, see Sally Ann Drucker, “Betty Friedan: The Three Waves of Feminism,” *Ohio Humanities*, April 27, 2018, <http://www.ohiohumanities.org/betty-friedan-the-three-waves-of-feminism/>; also Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000). Rosen refers, for instance, to an incident in the 1970s when a male judge in New York City “ordered a female attorney, dressed in a tailored, designer pants suit and silk blouse, to leave his courtroom and not to return until she wore a skirted suit.” See Rosen, *The World Split Open*, 163.

tunities opened by this Second Wave movement. Middle-class white women, in particular, felt freer to pursue higher education and forge careers while seeking divorces or not marrying at all, and women of all sexual orientations could explore erotic relationships outside of marriage without automatically being subject to the same degree of extreme stigmatization and demonization that had prevailed when, for instance, a woman’s sexual history could be introduced into divorce proceedings as evidence of her unfitness to retain custody of her children.

Ilene Beckerman: Left Ashore During the Second Wave

Such feminist awakenings (known at the time as “consciousness-raising”) were not, however, universally shared experiences, as Ilene Beckerman suggested implicitly throughout *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* and then made clear explicitly in one of her follow-up volumes, *Mother of the Bride* (2000). In the latter, Beckerman described with comic irony her own situation in the late 1960s and early 1970s: “I had gone from being a powerless daughter to a powerless wife to a powerless mother – all too quickly. I had been so busy changing diapers, I didn’t have time to read *The Feminine Mystique*. I had been so busy trying to look like Gloria Steinem, I didn’t have time to read Gloria Steinem.”¹³ It was one of the few moments in her published works where Beckerman made any overt political references to the feminist stirrings that were going on around her, while she was occupied with marriage, a household, and a family of five children born in quick succession (in her second union). These statements were also unusual for hinting, through repetition of the adjective “powerless” in connection with each of these gendered roles, at her own awareness of the existence of any possible injustice at the heart of family life or anger in reaction to it.

Certainly, there was little evidence anywhere in *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* that Beckerman had been, during the period of Second Wave feminism, in sympathy with what Susan Kingsley Kent has described as its adherents’ pursuit of “changes in the law, the social and economic system, and the culture that would ‘liberate’ them from current conceptions of femininity that ... locked them into stifling, unfulfilling, slavish positions, and often made them vulnerable to sexual

13 Beckerman, *Mother of the Bride*, 115.

predations from men.”¹⁴ Although Beckerman’s 1995 memoir may have hinted at a degree of agency and self-direction consistent with these attitudes, especially in its implication that the choice to end both of her first two marriages had been hers, she later revised this picture in her 1997 sequel, *What We Do for Love*. There, Beckerman revealed that her decision to seek a divorce from her first husband happened only after he already had left her, and that her initial response, rather than a welcome sense of release or empowerment, had been a mental breakdown that culminated in a suicide attempt and brief hospitalization in a psychiatric institution.¹⁵ Having come of age during what Lauren S. Cardon classifies as a “postwar period marked [by] a ‘return to normalcy’ during which businesses, colleges, advertisements, television programs, and the fashion industry conspired to put women back in the home,” Beckerman had absorbed its “passive mode of femininity.”¹⁶ To lose the security of her role as a wife was to become, at the age of 23, so socially and psychically unmoored as to be incapable of surviving without medical intervention. Even in this instance, however, as Beckerman reported in *What We Do for Love*, while disillusioned with her first marriage, she was not disillusioned about marriage as an institution and was buoyed by the advice of a woman friend and peer: “Dora kept telling me to get a divorce. She said I was still young and I could do better”¹⁷—meaning that she could find a worthier man to be her next husband.

Neither Ilene Beckerman nor “Dora,” it seems, had freed herself at the time from the injunction offered by Anne Fogarty in her influential 1959 manual, *Wife Dressing: The Fine Art of Being a Well Dressed Wife*, to “remember that you are an appendage of your husband, Adam’s rib that was separated from him ... and now spiritually returned to his side,”¹⁸ and there is reason to question the degree to which Beckerman ever renounced this internalized subordination or the feeling of incompleteness when not married. Especially for those of Beckerman’s generation, who were born in the 1930s, a willingness to live outside of Second Wave political consciousness, or even in opposition to it, was more common than feminists of any generation might wish to acknowledge. As we see from the retrogressive generalization that opened her illustrated volume, *Mother of the Bride* (which also serves as the epigraph to my chapter)—i.e., “All mothers want their

14 Susan Kingsley Kent, *Gender: A World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 132.

15 Ilene Beckerman, *What We Do for Love* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 1997), 54–65.

16 Lauren S. Cardon, *Fashion and Fiction: Self-Transformation in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 182.

17 Beckerman, *What We Do for Love*, 65.

18 Anne Fogarty, *Wife Dressing: The Fine Art of Being a Well-Dressed Wife* (New York: Glitterati, 2008 [1959]), 25.

daughters to get married. To most mothers, a daughter in a marriage that’s just okay is better than a daughter who’s single and happy”¹⁹—Beckerman could eventually reach the point of recognizing that it was possible to be both single and happy, while still believing this truth should be outweighed by the imperative for every woman to marry. It was an observation simultaneously humorous in tone and serious in content, as demonstrated by the rest of the memoir, which detailed the planning of her own oldest daughter’s wedding. As Beckerman would go on to state in that same work from 2000, “When I was in my twenties, you were supposed to get married. I never had to say, ‘I’m just a housewife.’ I never regretted not having a career. You only get a few years to be the mother of young children.”²⁰ This sentiment became her ultimate defense of marriage: not as an institution associated with heterosexual desire or with lasting romance, but as the one that enabled full-time motherhood.

While embodying what, from Lauren S. Cardon’s later critical perspective, might be called a passive femininity, the persona that Beckerman presented in her 1995 book *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* was nonetheless active in purely consumerist terms, as expressed through clothes shopping. A celebration of the exercise of individual taste through the selection and purchase of clothing, as well as a positive statement about the importance of preserving the memories associated with specific garments worn in the past, *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* proved both resonant and rewarding to large segments of American women readers. In January 1996, a few short months after the volume’s initial publication, Alex Witchel noted in the *New York Times* that it had a first printing of 40,000 and was already going into a second.²¹ Beckerman’s depoliticized approach to her subject—i.e., a summary of her life, as seen through a procession of (illustrated) articles of dress—offered a comforting and largely unchallenging literary and visual experience to mainstream audiences. When it came to the topic of high heels, for instance, there was none of the angst captured by Richard Thompson Ford in his assertion that “[i]f any single item of clothing can contain the controversies, contradictions, pleasures, pain, and prejudice of gendered clothing, it is the high-heeled shoe” or in his analysis of it as the epitome “of conventional femininity, required in many contexts by custom and express prescription.”²² Becker-

19 Beckerman, *Mother of the Bride*, 1.

20 Ibid., 116.

21 Alex Witchel, “Shopping with Ilene Beckerman; Wearing Her Life on Her Sleeve,” *New York Times*, January 24, 1996, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/01/24/garden/shopping-with-ilene-beckerman-wearing-her-life-on-her-sleeve.html>.

22 Richard Thompson Ford, *Dress Codes: How the Laws of Fashion Made History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 233.

man merely supplied instead a stick-figure drawing of herself in black and a matter-of-fact statement about the role that such an item of fashion had played in her first marriage: “Black dress with cut-out neckline and matching bolero jacket. Harry always liked me to wear my hair off my face. I could wear very high heels with Harry because he was so tall.”²³ What came through in her narrative was the simple pleasure of having owned these shoes, to be shared with women readers who also wished to enjoy the memory of wearing high heels while being free, at least temporarily, of the need to consider the fraught gendered social issues attached to them (in this case, why a woman was never supposed to be taller than her male partner).

As Shahidha Bari observes in *Dressed: The Secret Life of Clothes*, “to walk in the world as a woman is to be made available for assessment.”²⁴ Beckerman’s text, in contrast, provided a brief, amusing respite from such painful external scrutiny and from any attendant self-consciousness. It encouraged audiences of middle-class white women, in particular, to feel free to recall, as Beckerman herself did, the beauty of the “gorgeous green taffeta strapless gown” with a skirt “extravagantly full” that her sister had worn “to our cousin’s wedding”²⁵ while avoiding the question of how such Christian Dior-inspired “New Look” dresses of the late 1940s had been deployed both to romanticize heterosexual marriage ceremonies and to construct a disabling vision of postwar Western femininity as purely decorative.

Beckerman’s 1995 memoir deliberately steered clear of politics in another area, as well. As the promotional copy inside the dust jacket of the first edition announced, the persona Beckerman *fashioned* was that of an “Everywoman”: “Like all of us, she likes to look nice while she’s pursuing happiness”; she “invites us to reflect on our own lives and remember what we wore.”²⁶ This universalizing project, however, required Beckerman to downplay her Jewish identity. Although *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* was divided into sections according to decades, nowhere in the one labeled “The 1940s” was there any mention of what it meant to be growing up in a Jewish family during the period of the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel. Such references would have particularized her history and risked making the volume less of a glass in which readers of a different heritage could believe their own past was being reflected. Only decades later, in her 2011 tribute to her maternal grandmother, *The Smartest*

23 Ilene Beckerman, *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 1995), 100.

24 Shahidha Bari, *Dressed: The Secret Life of Clothes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), 55.

25 Beckerman, *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, 34.

26 Beckerman, *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, front flap.

Woman I Know, were there oblique references to a larger political framework when Beckerman discussed the unease that her grandparents exhibited, even while seemingly safe in New York City: "But every bone in their body was Jewish, and despite living in this wonderful land of opportunity, they were always on guard. The next Hitler or Stalin could be waiting around the corner on 64th Street."²⁷ The humorous turn at the end of this serious statement mirrored the even more determinedly comic treatment of religion and ethnicity in the earlier *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, where these elements were deployed for laughs and connected throughout with each of Beckerman's two failed marriages. To the first of her weddings, we are told, "My grandfather wouldn't come because he thought Harry was too old for me and because he was Catholic"²⁸; to her second wedding, this time to a man who was also a Jew, "My grandfather wouldn't come. He was still mad at me for marrying Harry."²⁹

Turning religious affiliation in the context of marriage into a punchline enabled Beckerman both to raise the subject of difference and to keep it from interfering with the construction of herself as an "Everywoman," in whom each white, middle-class women reader might potentially see herself. This was important to the selling of *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* as a text aimed at the middlebrow market, with the middlebrow text constituting, according to David Cardiff, a form of "entertainment" both "universal and particular in its appeal," offering every audience member the illusion of being an "exclusive initiate."³⁰ As Timothy Aubry has explained, "to elicit identification from the reader" is often the "central strategy [...] associated with middlebrow literature,"³¹ and Beckerman succeeded well at inspiring such identification. The reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review* noted at the time of its first publication that "[p]aging through the book is like rummaging through your own attic. Some of the items [of clothing described] will make you smile nostalgically, others will make you cringe in shame."³² Acknowledging the book's power to serve as a bond with and also among its women readers, she confessed her own "re-

27 Ilene Beckerman, *The Smartest Woman I Know* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2011), 8.

28 Beckerman, *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, 96.

29 Ibid., 106.

30 David Cardiff, "Mass Middlebrow Laughter: The Origins of BBC Comedy," *Media, Culture and Society* 10 (1988): 41.

31 Timothy Aubry, "Erica Jong's Textual Bulimia: *Fear of Flying* and the Politics of Middlebrow Consumption," *Journal of Popular Culture* 42, no. 3 (2009): 420.

32 Ellen Feldman, "Pumps and Circumstance: A Sartorial Memoir Conjures Up a Life in Terms of How It Was Clothed," *New York Times Book Review*, January 7, 1996, 28.

solve to send a copy” of Beckerman’s illustrated memoir “to several childhood chums, and my sisters, and a lot of other friends.”³³

Staging *Love, Loss and What I Wore* and Mainstreaming Third Wave Feminism

When it appeared in 1995, Beckerman’s volume may indeed have functioned as a gift book, exchanged frequently among white middle-class American women friends and relations in general, but it also drew the immediate attention of a particular pair of sisters, Nora and Delia Ephron. Both were prominent and commercially successful as novelists, journalists, essayists, and writers for mainstream theater and Hollywood films, as well as film producers (and one of the two sisters, Nora, was also a director of films). It was Nora Ephron, however, who enjoyed wider renown. At the point when they optioned *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* soon after its publication, Nora Ephron’s career as a screenwriter was associated in the public mind with heteronormative romantic comedies, thanks to the enormously popular film *When Harry Met Sally* (1989)—part of a genre sometimes dismissively labeled as “chick flicks.” Her fame was even greater for a 1983 novel and then for her own 1986 screenplay based on it: *Heartburn*, a bitterly funny, lightly fictionalized autobiographical account of a marriage between two high-profile figures gone bad, due to adultery by the husband. Though Nora Ephron may have been the better known of the two sisters, Delia Ephron was also widely recognized as a commercially viable, middlebrow author whose subjects, too, often centered on the problems that arose in and from marriage. Her *Funny Sauce: Essays about Family Life* (1986), for instance, dealt humorously with issues such as divorce, the challenges of step-parenting, and joint custody of children. By 1995, therefore, each Ephron sister had excelled at work that foregrounded heterosexual pairings, either building toward marriage or locked in marriages that were messily dissolving; each writer was especially interested, moreover, in representing the perspectives and emotions of the women characters, as these romances were forming or coming apart. By focusing on the situations of middle-class white women, while emphasizing what was personal and downplaying larger political implications, Nora and Delia Ephron—who, like Ilene Beckerman, were Jewish writers with a strong sense of comedy—had been able to appeal to the same sort of fan base that, in 1995, Beckerman was now attracting. It was hardly surprising that they would have seen at

33 Ibid.

once the commercial possibilities in adapting *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* to another medium and would have tried to ensure that they would be the ones to undertake this.

In her 2013 volume of autobiographical essays titled *Sister Mother Husband Dog*, Delia Ephron outlined briefly the background to this long gestation, which finally resulted in the publication of their script for a theatrical version of Beckerman’s memoir in 2008 and its professional debut onstage a year later:

Nora found the book [*Love, Loss, and What I Wore*] and fell in love with it. And she knew it was a play, a *Vagina Monologues* sort of thing. And I am eternally grateful, because it was pure joy. Eventually.

We always called it *The Vagina Monologues* without the vaginas [...].

We optioned the book in 1996, and the play opened Off-Broadway in 2009.

Fourteen years later. The world’s longest birth.³⁴

The finished product, which bore only a small resemblance to Beckerman’s original text, reflected a shift in attitudes that had occurred over that period of time in American culture—i.e., the mainstreaming of a new feminist movement known as the Third Wave. In its dramatic form, moreover, as Delia Ephron herself acknowledged, this version of *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* modeled itself closely on what was perhaps the most successful theatrical outgrowth of Third Wave feminism, Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*. During the process of making this transition to the stage, Ilene Beckerman’s text ceased to be the story of one “unliberated” middle-class, mid-century woman whose life had been dominated by social pressure to marry and whose personal satisfaction had come instead from a combination of motherhood and the pleasures of clothes shopping and dressing, for the Ephron sisters opened it up to accommodate other experiences, desires, and sources of fulfillment. In doing so, they were both responding to and reaffirming changes in American women’s lives and also in attitudes regarding marriage.

Third Wave feminism, like its Second Wave predecessor, began at the margins, but rapidly moved toward the center of public awareness, beginning that progress in the early 1990s. Unlike the Second Wave, this Third Wave was led by women of color and queer women, who emphasized that the category of “women” was by no means a unified or homogeneous one, nor were all women oppressed equally. Neither were women oppressed only by something called patriarchy; racism and homophobia, for instance, were just as destructive (and could be found even in communities of privileged white, heterosexual

34 Delia Ephron, “Collaboration,” in *Sister Mother Husband Dog* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 215.

women who identified with the Second Wave). As R. Claire Snyder has suggested, however, in a 2008 essay on the movement for the feminist journal *Signs*, one thing that the Third Wave did share with the Second was a belief in the importance of individual perceptions and histories—of the role of “the personal story” in political activism.³⁵ The difference lay in the highlighting and the valuing of difference itself. Snyder went on to explain that, as a reaction “to the collapse of the category of ‘women,’” the Third Wave had brought to the fore “personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism” and, “as a consequence of the rise of postmodernism,” it had “embrace[d] multivocality over synthesis.”³⁶

With the rise of the Third Wave, there were also shifts in the targets and goals of feminist activism. No longer was marriage itself viewed, as it has been by Betty Friedan and her contemporaries, as the primary social force placing constraints upon middle-class women’s lives by limiting their access to economic independence and confining their labor to the household. There was instead increasing concern, from the 1990s on, with another threat: what later came to be known as GBV (gender-based violence), including sexual assault and, within the framework of marriage, domestic violence. Attention to the latter was heightened, in the mid-1990s, by the widely publicized revelations, during O. J. Simpson’s murder trial and acquittal, of complaints regarding physical abuse that his dead ex-wife had made to the police while they were married.³⁷

The Vagina Monologues (1996), a play constructed by Eve Ensler as a series of first-person monologues by a diverse group of women characters and drawn from the playwright’s own interviews with a number of women from different communities, was integrally linked to this new focus on the subject of sexual violence, which had accompanied the emergence of the Third Wave. More than merely a work of theater, it became, in the words of Christine M. Cooper, “a worldwide phenomenon” and a “mass culture event, performed hundreds of times each year” over the following decade.³⁸ Its popularity was fueled by its direct connection to activism. With benefit performances often timed to coincide with Valentine’s Day, it served as “the motor behind V-Day, an antiviolence organization with the declared mission of ending violence against women and

35 R. Claire Snyder, “What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (2008): 184.

36 *Ibid.*, 175.

37 Maryclaire Dale, “O. J. Simpson Case Helped to Bring Spousal Abuse Out of Shadows,” *AP News*, June 12, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/c85957bb9c764313a88659b5837f5245>.

38 Christine M. Cooper, “Worrying about Vaginas: Feminism and Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 3 (2007): 727.

girls, once and for all, everywhere.”³⁹ What *The Vagina Monologues* also shared with Third Wave feminism was an insistence upon the importance of, to use R. Claire Snyder’s term, “multivocality,” a principle made literal in the play through its use of a series of personal narratives spoken by “a wide range of voices, distinguished by age, race or ethnicity, region, economic status, and sexual orientation.”⁴⁰ The mood and tone of these speeches ranged from serious to comic.

It was this dramatic work that Nora and Ephron decided to emulate when adapting Ilene Beckerman’s illustrated memoir for the stage. The humorous name they employed for their own version of *Love, Loss and What I Wore*—“*The Vagina Monologues* without the vaginas”⁴¹—was no mere joke. While a few recognizable episodes from the narrative of Beckerman—referred to throughout the play by her nickname of “Gingy” (for her red hair)—were still present as a framing device, they were no longer the sole or even the chief focus. Substituting for them and drawing the audience’s attention instead was a series of monologues by characters of differing social identities and backgrounds, all of whom recounted their love affairs (some with happy endings, some with tragic ones) with specific items of clothing and frequently deployed comic techniques when doing so. The storytellers ranged from a Latinx woman recalling the gang insignia-decorated sweater that she had worn with pride at age fifteen; to a survivor of stranger-rape during her freshman year at U. C. Berkeley, who found strength in remembering the pairs of boots she had loved both before and after her assault; to the former owner of a 1960s paper dress designed by Betsy Johnson that had been ruined by an unexpected rush of menstrual blood at a dinner party; to a former cancer patient who spoke of how concentrating on the prospect of eventually wearing, after surgical breast reconstruction, a woman friend’s gift of a white lace bra helped her to get through the nightmare of a mastectomy.

As in Ensler’s play, the memories recounted by the characters in the Ephrons’ *Love, Loss and What I Wore* (which inexplicably dropped from its title the so-called “Oxford comma” punctuation after the word “Loss”) were mostly of a kind associated with bodies marked as female. But also, as in Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*, there were limits as to the diversity of the representations of womanhood. Although the Ephron sisters’ clothing-related monologues were clearly influenced by Third Wave feminism, that influence only went so far. Third Wave theorists had asserted the crucial role in feminist discourse of race in general and of

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 728.

⁴¹ Ephron, “Collaboration,” 215.

Blackness in particular, along with the pressing need to examine and expose white racism. But race, while present as a subject, had not been the central issue in Ensler's play, and it was most definitely underrepresented in the Ephrons' later stagework, too. This was obvious from the cast list for its first production, which occurred at the Westside Theater in New York City on 1 October 2009. Indeed, all of the multiple roles were taken by white celebrity performers: Tyne Daly, Rosie O'Donnell, Samantha Bee, Katie Finneran, and Natasha Lyonne.⁴² The sole role written for a woman of color—the part of Nancy, the Latinx ex-gang member (which reinforced a problematic racial stereotype)—was played by Lyonne, an actor of French and Hungarian Jewish heritage. Just as Ilene Beckerman's original text had made it easy for white, middle-class women to identify with her narrative and had encouraged such identification, so the Ephrons' adaptation seemed especially inviting to audiences of the same demographic, who got only a diluted version of Third Wave multivocality and a distinct emphasis instead on whiteness.

One topic, however, did move the play beyond a narrow and conservative perspective: the intersection of marriage with sexual orientation. In the segment of their *Love, Loss and What I Wore* titled "Brides," which came late in the action, the Ephron sisters tackled overtly a major political controversy that was still very much unsettled and undecided in 2008/2009—i.e., the issue of same-sex unions. The construction of this episode introduced the topic only gradually, though, perhaps as a sop to the sensibilities of middlebrow, mainstream theatergoers, who were led gently toward it, rather than confronted with it.

"Brides" began with two women onstage, each one looking at and speaking alternately to the audience in succession:

LISA. I never thought I would get married.

AMANDA. I'm not somebody who dreamed of my wedding from a young age. I did not have visions. I just wanted a dress I could twirl around in.

LISA. But two months before my wedding I saw an ad that said, "Wedding Dress Sample Sale." So Saturday at 11 A.M. I was standing with 40 other brides-to-be in front of a store called "Brides 2 Be." They opened the doors and, stampede [...].

AMANDA. I went to all the San Francisco department stores and tried on white bridal dresses with satin tops and big fancy bottoms. It was like going back centuries [...].⁴³

⁴² Nora Ephron and Delia Ephron, *Love, Loss and What I Wore* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2008), 5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 42.

Only after further description of the difficulties in finding suitable attire for the ceremony did Lisa, the first of the two characters, reveal the greater complication associated with preparations for her wedding:

LISA. I've been dealing with my parents' homophobia since I was a young teenager. I thought they were going to get there, but when I told them I was getting married, they hit the roof. But my fiancée's mother was great. Right after we told her the news, she came right over with an old plastic sandwich bag full of family rings. She said to me, "I want you to pick the ring you want to get married in."⁴⁴

This revelation came almost at the end of the “Brides” section, when the audience members would have been fully involved already in the fate of these two characters and, presumably, sympathetic to their very ordinary and universal concerns with finding the right clothes and accessories for a wedding. It arrived with a stage direction that referred to the actions of Lisa: “(*She turns to Amanda.*)”⁴⁵ The character’s change in position was followed immediately by Lisa’s spoken words—“I, Lisa, take thee Amanda, to be my partner for life, to love, honor, be faithful to through good times and bad, as long as we both shall live”—and by Amanda’s recitation of the identical vow.⁴⁶ “Brides” then concluded with a more openly political sentiment than anything found elsewhere in Nora and Delia Ephron’s play or in Ilene Beckerman’s 1995 memoir. This took the form of a statement by her mother that Amanda quoted—a retort to Lisa’s mother, who had asked everyone repeatedly why it was necessary for this couple to marry: “‘Why’d they have to do this?’ And my mom said, ‘To honor their relationship.’”⁴⁷

The timing of this segment of the play was significant, as was the location of the two characters in it, indicated through Amanda’s reference to going “to all the San Francisco department stores.”⁴⁸ In February 2004, Gavin Newsom, then Mayor of San Francisco, had announced that same-sex marriages would be recognized as legal in that city. Within a month, more than 3,600 same-sex weddings had been performed.⁴⁹ This triggered a homophobic backlash in the State of California, resulting in California voters passing a ban (“Prop 8”) on

⁴⁴ Ibid., 42–43.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 43–44.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁹ Rachel Gordon, “State Lawmaker Joins S. F.’s Gay Wedding Waltz,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 9, 2004, <https://www.sfgate.com/news/article/State-lawmaker-joins-S-F-s-gay-wedding-waltz-2783567.php>.

these marriages in 2008, the same year in which Nora and Delia Ephron completed and published their script for *Love, Loss and What I Wore*.⁵⁰ With its negative presentation of maternal homophobia, its countering of that with an expression of maternal support for marriage as a necessary way to “honor” a same-sex “relationship,” and its centering of a romantic story of lesbian love and commitment—all tied to a shopping experience likely to be familiar to an audience of middle-class women theatergoers, involving the hunt for the perfect wedding dress—this section of the Ephrons’ play constituted a direct, if discreet, political intervention.

Such overt activism on behalf of what was called the “marriage equality” movement showed the impress of Third Wave feminism, with its strong commitment to advancing queer women’s rights. Yet even here, the Ephrons’ *Love, Loss and What I Wore* was far less daring and more safely mainstream than its theatrical inspiration, *The Vagina Monologues*. Ensler had risked ire and condemnation with her infamous “The Little Coochie Snorcher That Could” monologue—a sexually explicit defense by an adult speaker of her erotic encounter, when a young teenager, with an older woman as a liberating experience. What the Ephrons offered was far blander: a Third Wave-inflected production with much of the tang of salt removed from the Wave. The stage directions for the final part of “Brides,” which had the characters of Amanda and Lisa turn to one another before repeating their marriage vows, did not, after all, instruct the performers to re-enact the kiss that usually followed those words during a wedding ceremony; neither was there any expression in the dialogue of the role of sexual desire in their union. Nothing onstage, in fact, potentially challenged too directly the sensibilities of a middlebrow audience; everything remained “respectable” according to traditional class-based standards. Yet this short scene was still a far cry from, and an advance upon, the determinedly apolitical narrative of Ilene Beckerman’s memoir, with its avoidance of any mention of the Second Wave feminist ideologies that were roiling American society at the historical moment when she became a wife (twice) and then a mother.

Where Beckerman’s illustrated memoir and the Ephron sisters’ loose adaptation of it did overlap was in their critical, somewhat jaded representations of relations between husbands and wives within heterosexual marriage and their juxtapositions of these with vibrant, vital (non-sexual) connections between women bound by ties of blood and/or friendship. This latter emphasis, shared by the two texts, came together in the final “Gingy” section, “Scene 28,” of

⁵⁰ Not until 2015 would a ruling by the US Supreme Court legalize same-sex marriage in all fifty states.

the Ephrons' *Love, Loss and What I Wore*, which drew directly upon Beckerman's work and assigned an explanation of authorial intent to their stand-in for the writer:

GINGY. After I finished making all these drawings and writing all the bits and pieces that went with them [...] I made some copies [...] and gave them to my children and to my two best friends. I was so happy, you have no idea. It was the story of my life. My mother was in it, and my grandmother, and my Aunt Babbie. It was as if they were still alive. They were acknowledged. Because when my sister dies, no one but me will know who they were.⁵¹

In contrast, the Ephrons' adaptation presented the same character's history of heterosexual love affairs and marriages in a flat, one-sentence-long recitation of names, followed by a more enthusiastic declaration of emotion for an item of clothing by a woman designer: "So there it was. First Walter, then Harry, then Al, then Stanley. (*A Diane von Furstenberg dress.*) I loved this print jersey Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress. It was easy to put on and very comfortable and if you gained a few pounds it still fit."⁵²

The subject of weight and the damaging psychological pressure that women who were closely bound could exert upon one another formed the bridge into the Ephron sisters' most damning portrait of marriage. "Scene 20," titled "Fat/Thin," was, like "Brides," composed as a set of alternating speeches. But unlike the lesbian couple in "Brides," here the two figures directly addressing the audience, "Mary" and "Eve," had no relation to one another and seemed not to be aware of one another's monologues. Unusually, too, each was joined onstage by an additional speaking character—"Mary's Mother" and a woman psychiatrist, identified only as "Eve's Shrink."

From Mary, who described herself as "big as a house," the audience learned that her mother had expressed alarm about the size of her daughter's body, encouraged her to enter into a marriage that was loveless, and passed on to Mary her own "ivory satin" wedding dress from a high-end New York department store.⁵³ That same dress, which would be lent to all the women in this family for their weddings, proved a token of ill fortune. In Mary's words, "[w]e all got divorced, my whole family, everyone except my mother who stayed married to my father for fifty-six miserable years."⁵⁴

In counterpoint to this narrative, Eve's was the story of someone underweight and depressed, who had been urged by her psychiatrist to remain in

⁵¹ Ephron and Ephron, *Love, Loss and What I Wore*, 49.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 34.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

an unsatisfactory union on the grounds that being married was necessary for a woman's psychological health. Her own experience, however, had taught her the opposite lesson:

EVE. I have a picture of me and my first husband together [...] I was wearing my lime green winter coat, so short, with a plaid scarf, and I look really happy. But I was never happy with David. Whenever I see that picture, I always think how photos lie and how many marriages are just performances.⁵⁵

Despite the insistence by her “shrink” that Eve really was in love with her husband but was “just too neurotic to realize it,” Eve did achieve contentment in this monologue by becoming a writer and by freeing herself from each of the unbearable weights in her life: “David and I got divorced. And I left my shrink. (*To shrink.*) I mean, fuck you.”⁵⁶ The line was designed to elicit a laugh from the audience and also to encourage the spectators to applaud, cheering on the character who had liberated herself from two kinds of destructive relationships. As they learned, too, Eve's writing would connect her explicitly to women's culture and potentially to audience members who identified themselves as crafters, for her first book was about the art of crocheting.

Mary's and Eve's situations, as conceived by the Ephron sisters, seemed in some ways an echo of an earlier time in American social history, when heterosexual marriage (as many Freudian analysts affirmed) was assumed to be every woman's proper destiny. In rejecting this imperative, “Fat/Thin” appeared to be paying homage not to Third Wave feminism, but to the Second Wave with which Ilene Beckerman's original source text had refused to engage; yet its resolution was by no means wholly anti-marriage, for it also tempered the critique. Almost as an afterthought, this segment concluded with the characters of Mary and Eve reporting that they later made second marriages—not in white bridal gowns, but in, respectively, “my mother's navy blue suit” and “a shocking pink Mexican cotton skirt and a white Mexican blouse, off the shoulder”—and had found in these unions the fabled “happily ever after.”⁵⁷ Throughout *Love, Loss and What I Wore*, as middlebrow playwrights determined to promote maximum identification between the spectators and the performers onstage and, wherever possible, to avoid offending any faction of their audience, Nora Ephron and Delia Ephron tried, so to speak, to have their wedding cake and eat it, too.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 37.

Conclusion

Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson have suggested in *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature* (2007) that fashion “reflects and responds to society simultaneously; indeed, it conveys tensions particularly well.”⁵⁸ Throughout the latter part of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, few American institutions have been so fraught with tensions as marriage. Literary texts that focus on fashion, therefore, would seem logical vehicles for examining the problems inherent in this legal and social bulwark, as well as for exploring its positive potential. Nevertheless, Clair Hughes reminds us that “a concern for dress in art or literature ... is still regularly dismissed as female and frivolous.”⁵⁹ In 1995, when writing and illustrating *Love, Loss, and What I Wore*, however, Ilene Beckerman did not merely risk such a categorization of her work but embraced it; so, too, did Nora Ephron and Delia Ephron in their later stage adaptation of her narrative. Ultimately, while neither version of *Love, Loss, and What I Wore* celebrated marriage as it has frequently presented itself, in conventional and oppressive forms, each found differing ways to recuperate its possibilities, particularly as a source of bonding between and among women. Even from the perspective of the present moment when, as Rhonda Garelick has pointed out, a surprising degree of “ingrained misogyny” endures that “denigrates women’s culture as irrelevant, wasteful, and destructive,” such a project stands out for its courage.⁶⁰

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58 Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson, “Introduction,” in *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*, eds. Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007), 9.

59 Clair Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 184.

60 Rhonda Garelick, “Fashion Will Not Disappear. It Will Transform,” *New York Times*, December 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/22/opinion/covid-fashion-athleisure.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>.

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