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Channelling Intergenerational Desire in Catherine Johnson's *Mamma Mia!*

In this article, David Chandler challenges the often dismissive interpretation of Catherine Johnson's hugely successful *Mamma Mia!* (1999) as a sunny, upbeat, lightweight musical. Johnson's earlier dramatic work was of a more serious cast, and returned repeatedly to scenes of damaging, often exploitative, intergenerational desire. This interest continues in *Mamma Mia!* though commercial imperatives meant it had to be suppressed and displaced. As Sophie, the heroine, secretly meets the three middle-aged men who could be her father, but who have no idea she may be their daughter, the danger that they may be sexually attracted to her – one of them quickly labels her a 'minx' – becomes a subterranean force shaping the fates of most of the central protagonists and the final surprise irresolution of the paternity plot. Intergenerational relationships blossom in *Mamma Mia!*, but they are treated differently from the relationships between couples of similar ages. David Chandler is a professor in the English Department at Doshisha University, Kyoto. His background is in literary Romanticism, but since 2008 he has also published widely on the history of musical theatre in Britain. He is a director of Retrospect Opera.

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I have found my father, the God, only to discover that I do not need him. *Anaïs Nin, 5 May 1933*[1]

You had to fulfil the obsession to be reunited with him [your father], but also to liberate yourself from the fatalistic determinism of your whole life, of being the abandoned one.

Otto Rank to Anaïs Nin, November 1933[2]

MAMMA MIA!, written by Catherine Johnson, has been astonishingly successful both as a musical (1999) and a musical film (2008): at the time of this writing, the stage show alone has been seen by over 65 million people, in fifty productions, and grossed over $4 billion at the box office.[3]

As a commercial phenomenon, *Mamma Mia!* has, naturally, prompted academic attention, yet most of this has been rather peripheral to Johnson's story, focusing instead on such aspects as the dramatic use of Abba's songs, the 'jukebox' genre, the supposedly feminist themes, and the Greek setting. The story itself is generally read as too trivial for serious comment. Even a scholar willing to give the musical sustained critical attention can write: 'One word that might best describe the dramaturgy of the musical *Mamma Mia!* is fluff.'[4] This dismissal of the story explains, and to an extent is explained by, the biggest lacuna in *Mamma Mia!* scholarship: the failure of all the critics to read the musical in the light of Johnson's earlier, generally more serious, plays, or even to acknowledge the existence of that body of work. In this article I aim to rectify the omission and to take the story of *Mamma Mia!* seriously, because it is ultimately Johnson's ability to touch on difficult areas of human experience that explains the enduring resonance this musical has with audiences around the world.

Johnson's earlier plays return repeatedly to the theme of confusion, damage, and exploitation in intergenerational relationships. In her stories, a 'lost' young person (most often a girl), often in a single-parent family, is taken advantage of by an older (generally male) figure. Johnson powerfully explored an extreme form of such nonconsensual incest in her first professionally performed play, *Rag Doll* (1988), which achieved significant critical acclaim, was adapted for television, and established her career as a writer.[5]

Rag Doll offers several intriguing parallels to *Mamma Mia!*, and can be read as the

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shadow version of the latter's sunny world. It is about a thirteen-year-old girl called Donna, who, like Sophie in *Mamma Mia!*, grows up with no idea who her father is. Her uncle Kenneth is a sort of father substitute, and in some ways he does seem to care for her, but he also regularly sexually abuses her. Much of the power of the play derives from the way Johnson is able to suggest that this sort of thing, immensely damaging to children, goes on all the time, because families keep it secret: Donna's mother discovers the abuse, but is persuaded not to go to the police as that would shame the whole family.

Johnson's next play, *Boys Mean Business* (1989), explores something similar, as Gary, a married father, has an affair with the family's fifteen-year-old babysitter, Dawn. In response to his brother's approving comment, 'Nothing like a bit of under-age, is there?', he responds 'Dawn's very mature for her age', emphasizing the girl's physical development.[6] Like *Rag Doll*, *Boys Mean Business* suggests that men's sexual energies are frequently undisciplined, devious, and disinclined to accept conventional moral codes; and it is again concerned with what has since become known as 'grooming'.

These sorts of issues continue to haunt Johnson's work. In the bleak sex comedy *Shang-a-Lang*, which premiered in November 1998, just five months before *Mamma Mia!*, Pauline and Jacky recall how their friend, the alcoholic nymphomaniac Lauren, when still under age, got drunk in a playground and had to be taken home by a Mr Owen, who first had sex with her in his car. 'He'd never get away with it now,' Jackie opines, and Pauline agrees: 'No, that's child abuse, and rape, now.'[7] Alcohol and sex have since become inseparable in Lauren's world, and there is a sense that she has never been able to grow up properly.

Where's Willy? (1994) turns things round by dramatizing predatory women at a hen party, and the humiliation of the male strippers tasked with satisfying their hunger for erotic entertainment.[8] The central character, Terry, a motherless seventeen-year-old boy, is forced into the unwanted and unappreciated role of older women's sex object.

There is a pattern here, and in the present essay I argue that the pattern continues into *Mamma Mia!*, even though it is there suppressed as much as possible in the interests of the sunny, upbeat, happy-ending, commercial sort of story that Johnson was charged with writing as a vehicle for Abba's hits. My interest is in the way the suppressed material nevertheless shapes the story, helping root it in real human psychology and making it rather more than a mere romantic-comedy fairy tale, or 'fluff'. In other words, this astonishingly successful musical needs to be read against the grain if we are really to grasp its structural dynamics, an understanding of what has to be adapted in order to obtain the sort of happy-ever-after ending impossible in Johnson's earlier plays.

Taking *Mamma Mia!* Seriously

In drawing out what is largely buried, I read Sophie's story in the light of Anaïs Nin's literary-psychological account of her reunion with her father in the 1930s, not published until the 1960s, and not in its full, unexpurgated version until the 1990s. This is the most graphically detailed and minutely analyzed case of father–daughter incest in twentieth-century literature. When her father left his family, Nin felt deeply abandoned as an eleven-year-old girl. When she met him again, many years later, she felt 'a realization of the impossibility of meeting on earth except as man and woman, in the completeness of sex'.[9] Although *Mamma Mia!* ventures nowhere near such disturbing territory, Nin's emotional arc in relation to her father, as crucially diagnosed by Otto Rank, offers parallels with Sophie's, and highlights what is at stake.

My analysis reads the stage and cinematic versions of *Mamma Mia!* as both telling the same story, albeit in slightly different ways which reflect the different mediums. Both were written by Johnson, just as they were produced and directed respectively by Judy Craymer and Phyllida Lloyd; fans of the stage version will probably have seen the movie too. An additional reason for reading them together is that much of the best

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Mamma Mia! criticism to date has been concerned with the movie.

Seducing the Father

Countless romantic comedies have been built around a young couple meeting, falling in love, encountering difficulties as they circumvent disapproving parents, before finally getting betrothed or married, amidst general satisfaction. *Mamma Mia!* reverses all these generic expectations. Here the young couple are on the point of marriage, with any parental disapproval seemingly already overcome – the groom's parents are bizarrely never mentioned – and, at the climax, they unexpectedly decide to postpone their wedding indefinitely, a decision no one seems to regret.

Yet the traditional parental threat to a young lovers' union can still be traced in Johnson's story, albeit in a very unconventional form. Sophie, who has grown up with her mother, Donna, has recently discovered she has three possible fathers, unaware of their relationship to her, and wants to use the wedding to meet them, to discover which of them really is her parent. Yet her fiancé, Sky, is stoutly opposed to any attempt to identify her father, which means that the possible fathers are invited without his knowledge or consent.

Sky is angry when he discovers what Sophie has done, believing the wedding has been arranged primarily as an excuse for her to meet her father – a conclusion supported by Sophie's eventual cancellation of the wedding. Johnson thus sets up her story in a way that means Sophie's public relationship with Sky is threatened by her secret relationship with her possible fathers. She keeps the latter set of relationships hidden from everyone except best friends Ali and Lisa, who seem to be in the story simply to act as her confidantes, since they more or less disappear in the second half, when no longer needed for that purpose.

The first full song in *Mamma Mia!*, 'Honey, Honey', is introduced in a very unusual and disconcerting way. Sophie is reading to Ali and Lisa from her mother's old diary, the volume which chronicles the three sexual encounters which left Donna pregnant. She then breaks into song to ventriloquize her mother's historic passion for the three men involved. I cannot think of a comparable case in all of musical theatre of a child ventriloquizing her parent's sexual desire in this way: 'He's a love machine / Oh, he makes me dizzy!'[10] From the very beginning of the 'three possible fathers' plot, then, Sophie is linked to these men not just as a daughter longing for a father but as a young woman imagining them as lovers.

In the 'Honey, Honey' scene this may seem simply prurient fun. But by the time the second half of the musical commences, Sophie's tendency to imagine herself as her mother making love to her father(s) takes on a much more serious aspect. The scene described as a 'Nightmare Ballet' occurs on the night of her first encounter with her possible fathers:

> Sophie imagin[es] her mother in a foursome with the three possible suitors who could be her father. Sophie also sees herself, in an out-of-body experience, as the bride being given away by the three fathers, only that the young bride is actually Sky in a bridal dress.[11]

The accompanying song, 'Under Attack', asserts 'They're on my track / Three dad's [*sic*], one lover'[12] – an awkward but suggestive reworking of the original 'He's on my track, my chasing lover'.[13] The awkwardness and suggestiveness are greatly increased if the apostrophe is read as anything but an odd typo: in that case, we can trace a meaning something like 'I'm being pursued, the one lover of three dads', a sinister scenario matching the dream.

The 'Nightmare Ballet' combines notions of father and lover in a disturbing way that, like many of Nin's fantasies, seems both designed for psychoanalysis and possibly influenced by psychoanalytical literature. Indeed, Nin's graphic confessions of how her desires would overlap and mutate are apropos here. After her first meeting as an adult with her father, Nin wrote:

> At night I dreamed that my father caressed me like a lover, and I experienced an immense joy. I

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Three possible fathers, the mother and the bride to be – or not to be. A publicity shot.

awoke to find it was Hugo [her husband]. I also thought at night of the many resemblances between my father and Henry [Miller, her lover].[14]

This is the same sort of confusion and blurring of boundaries that Johnson's 'Nightmare Ballet' evokes. Here, Johnson takes us closest to her usual imaginative world of sex as something bewildering and damaging to young people. It is noteworthy that the scene did not find its way into the film version of *Mamma Mia!* – presumably it was found too graphic and disturbing for the general movie audience, or at least risked the loss of a family-friendly PG rating.

At crucial points in the musical, then, as Sophie introduces us to the three possible fathers, and deals with the emotional fallout of each declaring her his daughter, she imaginatively places herself in her mother's shoes, picturing the men at first comically, but in the 'Nightmare Ballet' more sinisterly, as lovers. Of course this can and should be understood as an expression of unconscious fantasy rather than as something likely to shape her conscious behaviour when she is in the company of the three men.

Nevertheless, her behaviour, when seen from the men's point of view, has clear seductive overtones. Most obviously, she chooses to spend a great deal of exclusive time with them the day before her wedding, treating them as though they are very important people, despite the fact she has never met them before. They do not question her decision to do so.

The Greek Connection

They have all made a major effort to travel to the imaginary island of Kalokairi for the wedding, because of what Sophie calls a 'siren call'.[15] As with other references to Greek mythology in *Mamma Mia!*, there is plenty of cultural baggage behind this, not all of which needs unpacking.[16] But sirens have been consistently associated with destructive sexual allure: the point, always, is that men would do well to resist their call. Here the referent is ambiguous; the three men have taken all this trouble in the belief that Donna, their former lover, has invited them to the wedding, though in fact it is Sophie who issued the 'call'. Is mother or daughter the siren? Some of the publicity material for the film deliberately highlighted this ambiguity.

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The line between mother and daughter is again blurred, but Sam's initial reaction to Sophie highlights the incestuous dangers lurking just beneath the surface of the story:

> You are a little minx. You're worse than your mother. I'm glad you never met my boys. You'd ruin them![17]

The word 'minx' allows for potent sexual associations, and the context suggests Sam has those in mind.[18] If Sophie is 'worse' than her mother, she is the more dangerously fascinating. Her erotic attractions are fraught with danger as she develops significant relationships with these three men, all apparently single (Harry is not single in the stage musical, but that is only revealed late in the play), all unaware of any familial relationship with her.

In general, the film of *Mamma Mia!* treads more carefully than the stage musical in not allowing any suggestion of father–daughter incestuous feeling, hence the removal of the 'Nightmare Ballet'. Yet the film brings the 'siren' idea to life in a way that has slightly (but rightly) disturbed at least one critic. Sarah Godfrey describes the afternoon scene in the film as 'a sequence foregrounding the interaction between a nubile swimsuit-clad girl and three men who at this stage have no idea she may be their daughter, although they have already noted her resemblance to their former lover'.[19]

Godfrey senses something not-quite-innocent here, and close analysis of the scene supports her intuition. Sam, Bill, and Harry are seriously thinking of leaving the island at this point, having been ordered to do so by Donna. Thus the longing for her father, which has driven Sophie's scheming, is in severe danger of being disappointed. In these afternoon hours she has to persuade all three men (none of which she has identified as her father) to stay, and to that end effectively abandons Sky, who is naturally a little upset when he realizes she is nowhere to be found. She swims out to Bill's boat, emerging from the sea dripping wet, looking very beguiling – a spectacle readily linked to the earlier 'siren call' she claims the men have heard.

The film also encodes a reference to incestuous danger which is not present in the stage version. The potent romantic effect of Kalokairi, which seems generally to arouse sexual desire, at least in outsiders, is explained by its being the site of 'Aphrodite's Fountain'. One of the principal Aphrodite myths concerns the goddess cursing a young girl, Myrrha, into falling in love with her father. Given the way Sam, Bill, and Harry are tricked by a 'siren call' from the site of Aphrodite's Fountain, the link is suggestive.

Recognizing the Daughter

At a key moment in Nin's journals, as she and her father are about to make love for the first time, he shouts '*Toi, Anaïs! Je n'ai plus de Dieu!*' ('You, Anaïs! I have lost God!' – that is, 'I'm damned').[20] Even a hardened debauchee like Joaquin Nin clearly understood himself to be crossing a profound moral threshold, and partly recoiled from doing so. Sophie and her possible fathers are obviously not going to reach this degree of intimacy, except, possibly, in the subconscious world of the 'Nightmare Ballet'. Nevertheless, the men are led towards a moral threshold and recoil from it – the point of recoil being the sudden recognition of Sophie as their daughter.

This recognition does not come easily. The film makes this clearer than the stage version, suggesting that Sophie and her possible fathers spend a long afternoon together without the topic of her father ever coming up, or any of the three men sensing she might be his daughter. Somehow, it is suggested, the conditions for this realization were not right in the afternoon; it is only in the eroticized atmosphere of the hen party (later invaded by the boys) that recognition comes.

This is surely the strangest scene in *Mamma Mia!* Sophie's friends seat the three possible fathers on tables and caress them with erotic abandon while Sophie shifts around nervously. 'They are truly being ravaged!' is Johnson's direction.[21] In the film, it is only Bill and Harry who are seized, tied up, and caressed. According to Sue Harper, 'the intoxicated female dancers capture the

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male interlopers, in a style redolent of the Bacchanalian revels . . . the film touches on their predatory nature.'[22] (I see no evidence that the girls are 'intoxicated' in the sense of being drunk, but they might be high on desire.)

For Johnson, this was very much a return to the world of *Where's Willy?*, the key differences being that here it is younger women seeking erotic gratification from older men, and the latter play a purely passive role. It is a difficult scene to interpret, especially in the stage musical, where it is not clear how the men respond to being 'ravaged', apart from Sam ambiguously saying 'Thank God you did' when Sophie apologizes for dragging him away.[23] Was he uncomfortable with the experience or in danger of liking it too much? In the film, things are more straightforward, for the episode is used to introduce Harry's homosexuality: he clearly dislikes all the caressing, while Bill revels in it. But in both versions it is apparent that here and nowhere else, in a rather choreographed, ritualistic fashion, the sexual attraction of young women to older men is acknowledged.

Mamma Mia! moves close to something uncomfortable in this scene – the site of its buried fears. If Sophie were to join her friends in the 'ravaging' of her possible fathers, how should an audience react? What is it that stops her doing so? This scene precedes her sexualized nightmare: is Johnson suggesting a causal link? One of the distinctive features of *Mamma Mia!* is that, although the older-generation characters are carefully individualized, this is not true of the younger generation: Sky appears to have a lot of friends very much like him, and Sophie a lot of friends just like her. Throughout the party scene, Sophie is in danger of disappearing into the field of female bodies, and only her agitation about working out who her father is gives her a distinct identity.

Mamma Mia! certainly does not go as far as the controversial Stanley Donen film, *Blame it on Rio* (1984), in terms of offering what many critics read as 'father–daughter incest, in a disguised form', but as in that earlier vision of what might happen to inhibited men in sunny places, there is a suggestion that if a middle-aged man enjoys the erotic attention of his teenage daughter's friend(s), then his relationship to his own daughter is hardly innocent.[24] *Blame it on Rio* explores the suggestion, but *Mamma Mia!* quickly shuts it down: the ravaging scene seems to alert the men to the fact that, if these girls are young enough to be their daughters, one of them actually might *be* his daughter. And this is the pivot on which the story turns, the '*Toi, Sophie!*' moment.

The ravaging immediately precedes the series of conversations in which Bill, Sam, and Harry one by one reveal their sudden conviction that they are Sophie's father. The film segues arrestingly from showing Bill's delight at being surrounded by attractive young women to his shock and dismay as he suddenly comes to the realization that the girl at the centre of all this beguiling eroticism is his daughter. After two shots of him alone, looking dazed and confused, we next see him dancing with Rosie – the start of the process which will link him firmly to a woman of his own generation.

Giving Away 'the Minx'

As Bill, Sam, and Harry all claim paternity of Sophie they are, in conventional sociocultural terms, divesting her of minx-like erotic charms by claiming her as a daughter who urgently needs 'giving away' to another man. The pressure of potentially incestuous feeling, brought into focus in the ravaging scene, has built up to the point where it has to be released and defused. And a general Russian roulette principle seems to be at work: if the identity of Sophie's father is actually revealed, two of the three older men could experience safely non-incestuous feelings of attraction to her minx-like charms. By leaving them all in doubt as to whether they really are the father, Johnson forecloses this possibility.

But although the eroticized, festive atmosphere forces Bill, Sam, and Harry to claim Sophie as a daughter at this juncture (if we treat their episodes of paternal recognition as more than just a theatrical contrivance), it is important to recognize that Bill's acceptance

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Stephen Beckett as Bill Austin and Lucy May Barker as Sophie. Photo: Brinkhoff & Mögenburg.

of her as a daughter is significantly different from Sam and Harry's subsequent claims on her. Bill tries to avoid the fateful conversation, which is pressed on him by Sophie:

SOPHIE All my life, there's been this huge unanswered question, and I don't want any more secrecy!

BILL What do you want from me?

SOPHIE Bill, please! Are you my father?

BILL Yes. I think so. Yes.

SOPHIE You know what comes next?

BILL Oh, you're not going to tell me that you have a twin sister, are you?

SOPHIE Will you give me away tomorrow?

BILL Give you away?[25]

By contrast, Sophie's conversation with Sam proceeds as follows:

SAM Sophie, come here. I know why I'm here. Why didn't Donna tell me? How long have you known I'm your father?

SOPHIE What? Not long at all. Sam, listen to me. My mom doesn't know that I know. So can we wait until after my wedding?

SAM Who's giving you away tomorrow?

SOPHIE Nobody.

SAM Wrong. I am. Our secret till then.

And Sam leaves the confused Sophie. Moments later, in a similar, but even terser exchange, Harry claims to be her father and says *he* will walk her down the aisle.

No doubt some of this is simply for comic effect, but a significant distinction is being drawn. Bill's reaction is that of a man who expected to sow his wild oats without being presented with a daughter twenty years later. Rather than feeling joy, his immediate fear is he may have unwittingly fathered other children ('You're not going to tell me that you have a twin sister, are you?'). There is never any direct suggestion that he was in love with Donna, and the depth of his feeling for her is only indirectly hinted at by the effort he makes to attend her daughter's wedding: perhaps a necessary plot device more than anything else. Sam and Harry's reactions, by contrast, are those of men who consider Donna the love of their life and are delighted to find that their brief union with her produced a child.

These reactions dispel the incestuous fears haunting *Mamma Mia!* in rather different ways. Sam and Harry are keen to publicly assume the role of father as soon as possible, removing any ambiguity in their previous relationship with Sophie, while Bill is more concerned with reshaping his own behaviour, opening himself to the advances of an older woman who cannot possibly be his daughter, who has declared an aversion to having children, and who may well be too old for childbearing anyway (Julie Walters, Rosie in the film, was fifty-eight at the time of its release). Sam and Harry want to place Sophie in a safe space, free from incestuous possibilities, while Bill is more concerned with placing himself out of harm's way. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy how, in the film version, all three men quickly pursue new relationships after their life-changing afternoon spent with the 'nubile swimsuit-clad' siren Sophie.

Rag Doll, *Boys Mean Business*, *Shang-a-Lang* and *Where's Willy?* all involved transgressive

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sexual desire crossing generational boundaries: Johnson does not believe in a world where middle-aged men are always conveniently immune to the attraction of young women. In *Mamma Mia!*, the disruptive threat of intergenerational desire, mostly suppressed in the main narrative, has to go somewhere, and it is seen in Sam's rapid categorization of Sophie's sexual allure as a threat to his *sons*, and, in more curious ways, in the 'ravaging' scene at the hen party.

Displaced Intergenerational Desire

But this leaves unclear the question of where intergenerational desire ultimately finds a home. The germ of *Mamma Mia!* was that Sophie would have three possible fathers.[26] Thus, from the beginning, the challenge for Johnson was to map out narrative arcs for three middle-aged men that would lead them safely away from the attractive, friendly young girl, resembling their former lover, who is so mysteriously (as far as they are concerned) eager to associate with them.

Johnson's basic solution is to pair two of them (Sam and Bill) with women of their own generation despite the fact that most of the females around are of Sophie's generation, not obviously in relationships – and, conventionally, nearly all beautiful, slim, model-types in the film. Harry, the third man, is revealed as gay, despite his early fling with Donna. Thus, by the end of the musical, whether or not the three men are 'impotent onlookers' in relation to Sophie, as Godfrey maintains – a noteworthy choice of terminology – their *potent* sexual energies are clearly directed elsewhere.[27] A great deal of the narrative energy of *Mamma Mia!* goes into establishing these other relationships.

This is tidy, but Johnson also untidies things by allowing intergenerational relationships at a slight distance from the central Sophie–Donna plotline. There is one in the stage musical, between Tanya and a young man called Pepper. In the film, there are two: the Tanya–Pepper relationship, and the relationship which develops between Harry and an unnamed young Greek man. Tanya is, significantly, the most overtly sexualized and anti-romantic character in the musical, an upmarket version of Lauren in *Shang-a-Lang*. The script contains several references to the fact she has been married and divorced three times. A trust in easy replaceability appears to inform her attitude to sex, which she glosses in the film as 'being taken care of' (subverting any deeper resonances in the word 'care').

There are a number of references to her promiscuous, possibly experimental sexual history ('Now that does take me back,' she responds suggestively to Rosie's question about what they can do with three men).[28] In the movie's rendition of 'Dancing Queen', as she sings the line 'Anybody could be that guy', she illustrates it by placing a dried, reddish bullrush between her legs to imitate an erect penis. She appears to like young men as much as they like her. In strict dramatic terms, Tanya is completely unnecessary. She has nothing to do with the story of Sophie and her possible fathers, yet she is an audience favourite, a counterweight to the more romantic experiences of other characters.

It is intriguing that critics, many of whom have been determined to find a deeper feminist message in the musical than it can bear, have shown much more interest in what they consider the end of the Tanya–Pepper relationship than its conception. Her 'dismissal' of Pepper with the song 'Does Your Mother Know?', which reverses the original Abba lyric, where an older man addresses a young woman, has been seized on hopefully as an iconic feminist moment. Malcolm Womack, for example, writes:

> By having the sexually empowered Tanya sing this as a dismissal to a younger man, it [the musical] turns a song that winks at the temptations of a young woman into a withering attack on virile posturing, and the repeated question 'Does your mother know that you're out?' moves from coy flirtation to a biting insult.[29]

Louise FitzGerald similarly asserts that 'the narrative trope of the older woman and younger man relationship that has become such a regular feature of post-feminist cinema . . . is wholly renounced by Tanya (Christine Baranski) in her performance of

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"Does Your Mother Know?"'[30] There is a troubling lack of nuance and context in these assertions, however; they put the feminist cart before the narrative horse. 'Does Your Mother Know?' is preceded by the following conversation:

PEPPER Tanya! Let's pick up where we left off last night.

TANYA Last night never happened. I've drawn a veil over last night. Oh, my God. Look at the time. I've got work to do.

PEPPER Work?

TANYA A little repair and renovation.

PEPPER Come on. You don't mess with a masterpiece.[31]

Although the exact nature of what happened between the two is left deliberately, playfully vague, in the stage version Pepper displays his chest, presumably because Tanya left her mark upon it. Enough is said to suggest that Pepper got some of what he wanted and Tanya, having sobered up, regrets she gave so much encouragement. Indeed, the official book issued to accompany the film states unequivocally: 'It's obvious that something happened between them [Tanya and Pepper] during the night of the hen and stag celebrations'.[32]

Understood in this context, any 'withering' anger expressed in 'Does Your Mother Know?' is surely partly self-directed, as Tanya has got herself into a situation where a virile young man feels he has a public claim on her. Moreover, in the stage version we see Tanya and Pepper leaving the stage arm in arm even after this 'dismissal', and it is far from certain whether the relationship, such as it is, is actually over. The potential for intergenerational desire and sex is clear in this sub-plot, and it is striking that it is represented as rather silly and comic.

Displacing the Oedipal Twist

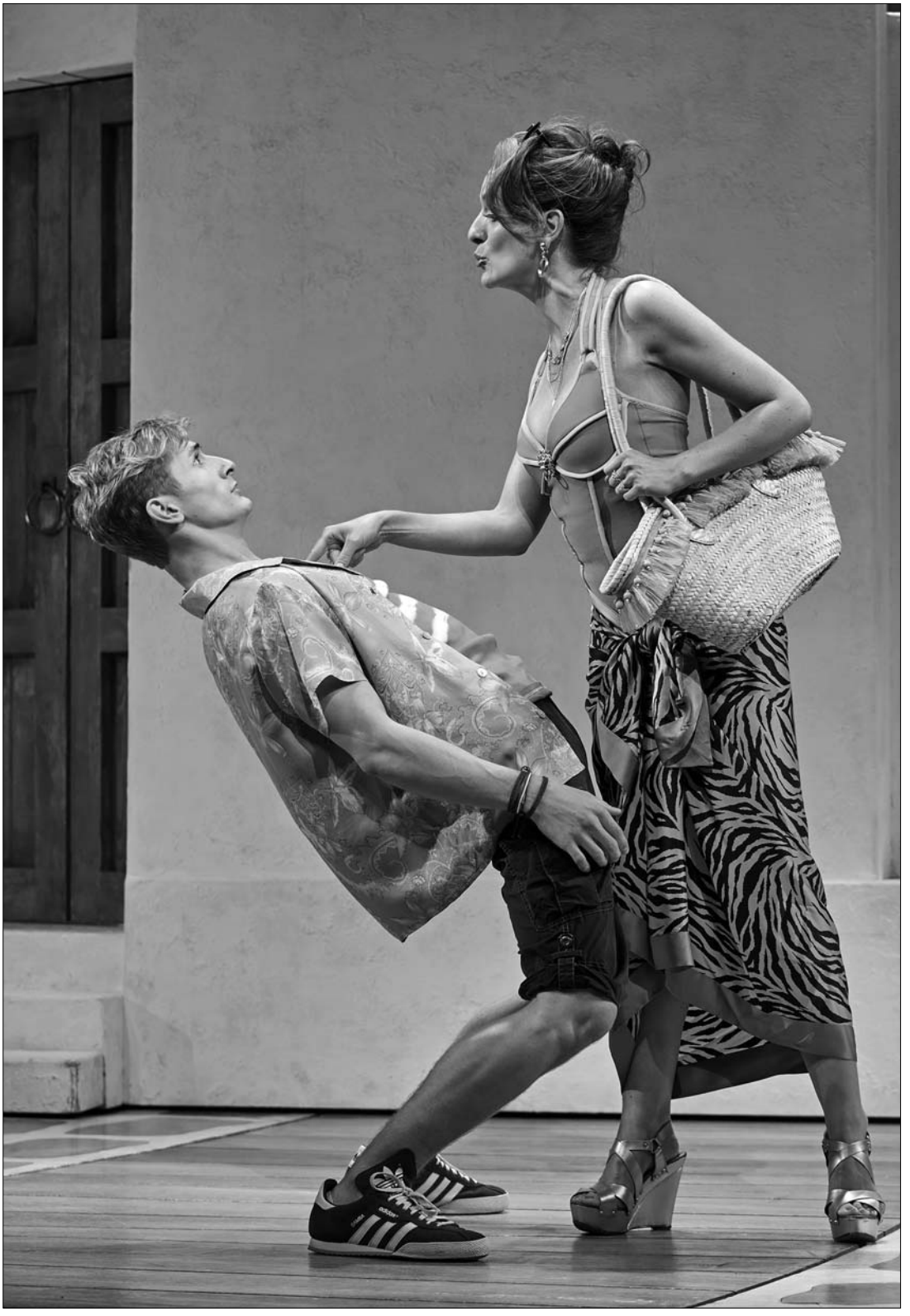
Importantly, though, it is precisely the comic nature of the Tanya–Pepper relationship that allows the musical an explicit joke about incest. When Tanya tells Pepper she is old enough to be his mother, he responds, melodramatically: 'Well, you can call me Oedipus.'[33] In my experience, the joke tends to misfire with London audiences, perhaps because it is both academic and crude, or perhaps because it is simply not very funny.[34] It is no surprise that it did not find its way into the film. It effectively references both the most famous of theatrical incest plots and the exceptional centrality of the Oedipus myth in Freudian psychology. And it is tempting to read it along Freudian lines, as a displaced 'release' of something suppressed in the larger conversation *Mamma Mia!* offers us.

If Tanya's concern is that intergenerational coupling is always vaguely incestuous, Pepper's 'solution' is simply to embrace that thought and live it out as a fantasy of actual mother–son sexual union. And if *Mamma Mia!* can admit that fantasy, even at the level of a joke, it is legitimate, given the centrality of the Sophie plot, to read this as a sideways displacement of the far more common incestuous situation the story has to avoid: the father–daughter coupling.[35] This has its own classical and mythological exempla, of course, even if they are less famous than the Oedipus legend. The Myrrha story, with its connection to Aphrodite, is the most immediately relevant. 'Well, you can call me Myrrha,' one of Sophie's cultured friends might say to a hesitating Sam, Bill, or Harry.

If the film version of *Mamma Mia!* loses one incest joke, it gains another – funnier, less explicit, but also much closer to the central plotline. The morning after the party, Bill is telling Harry about Sophie, but Harry misunderstands and thinks he is talking about Rosie. Bill says, 'She's a wonderful girl, but can I take her on in my life?' and the comic punchline drops when Harry says 'You don't have to marry her!' – at which moment, significantly, Rosie arrives. Bill's astonished 'What?!' in response to Harry's comment briefly conjures the picture of a man who thinks he's suspected of a romantic interest in his daughter.

Tanya's flirtation with Pepper is represented as transgressive and kinky compared to the conventionally romantic Sophie–Sky, Donna–Sam and Rosie–Bill couplings. Johnson seems to place Harry's gay relationship somewhere in the middle. Her earlier work

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Danny Nattrass as Pepper and Kirsty Hoiles as Tanya. Photo::Brinkhoff & Mögenburg.

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is full of robustly heterosexual people, so it is a little surprising to find a gay relationship in the far more consciously commercial *Mamma Mia!*, apart from it avoiding the problem of all three possible fathers needing to find older female partners.

In the stage musical, it is revealed, at the very end, that Harry is part of a 'family' with Lawrence.[36] We are given no details respecting the latter. The biggest change to the story in the film is that Harry is a repressed bachelor until accepting he is gay the night before Sophie's wedding. The young Greek man he falls for, not given a name, is played by Juan Pablo Di Pace, some nineteen years younger than Colin Firth's Harry, thus introducing a second intergenerational relationship into the story.

Di Pace is not given a single line of his own, but sings 'It's magic' with Firth in the course of 'Take a Chance on Me'. The film treats this relationship much more circumspectly than that between Tanya and Pepper, but what was probably intended as discretion also gives it a certain furtive, closeted quality, presumably mainly due to the homosexual nature of the relationship; but the fact that it is also intergenerational reinforces the feeling that intergenerational desire is a rather awkward fact of life in this story, both suppressed and, like most that is suppressed, making its presence unmistakably felt.

Liberation

When Jennifer, the nubile young siren at the centre of *Blame it on Rio*, tells her father that she has had sex with a forty-three-year-old man, he is appalled, denouncing it as 'obscene'.[37] Despite this, he quickly comes up with an explanation: she only did it because of his own absence. She was looking for a 'father figure' in a way he calls 'classic' – presumably meaning a textbook piece of psychology.

This is a more innocent version of Otto Rank's analysis of the Nin case, where an 'abandoned' daughter will literally seduce her father to get him back, although, as noted above, many critics still read *Blame it on Rio* as about 'disguised' incest. In both cases, though, the seduction of the father (figure), once achieved, the female is understood as liberated from the psychologically unhealthy yearning for him which was subverting, or perverting, normal romantic impulses. While *Mamma Mia!* is a good deal more innocent still, its basic psychological trajectory is the same.

Sophie's quest for her father is driven by a sense of incompleteness: 'I feel like there's a part of me missing, and when I meet my dad, everything will fall into place.'[38] Nin was driven by a similar feeling, and for a time at least tried to believe that 'everything' really had 'fall[en] into place'. In May 1933 she wrote to her father:

> All the discoveries I have made about your life and about you correspond to what I so deeply wanted them and you to be. I realize that I searched dimly for them in others, but you, only you, fill a great void that I found in the world.[39]

Sophie, of course, never gets to make such a statement. As soon as Sam, Bill, and Harry agree to share the role of father, she says: 'I don't know which one of you is my dad, but I don't mind. I've learned something about myself. Sky, let's *not* get married.'[40] This surprise twist in the story, which allows Donna and Sam to get married instead, has become famous, but there has been very little discussion of what shapes Sophie's thinking here. The moment indeed is so hurried it can seem Johnson hardly wants the audience to dwell on the matter of motivation, much less to psychoanalyze it. Yet the emotional situation must ring true if the audience is to feel satisfied.

Faced with three paternal claims, in the morning Sophie still wanted to know the identity of her biological father. Now, having heard the three men publicly declare a willingness to share paternal responsibilities, she feels free of the need to push the matter any further. It must be recognized that there are clear material benefits to her having three fathers rather than one, when at least two of the men appear to be wealthy, but it seems unlikely that Johnson wants Sophie's motivation to be read as so cynical. It is more the

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case that the narrative of abandonment, or incompleteness, which has shaped Sophie's sense of herself, now stands overwhelmingly refuted. Having gained three fathers, she need lose none.

Longing for the Father

Nin's diary is a remarkable demonstration of how a sense of abandonment or incompleteness can vanish almost instantly when the absent parent makes a gesture of acceptance. Around the time of her thirtieth birthday, Gustavo Durán, a young Spanish intellectual, brought her the news that her father had 'talked for several hours about the sorrow of having lost his children', and that he claimed to have 'suffered very much' because of Anaïs 'abandoning' *him* (she had stopped writing to him many years earlier).[41] This unexpected report led to Nin finally meeting her father again less than three months later. But one of the most remarkable passages in the whole course of her voluminous diaries occurs immediately after her conversation with Durán:

> When I came home I looked at the fire and hallucinated. The feeling of an *unbearable* joy came over me, the feeling that I had reached the *end* of life, that by the excess of my pain, the excess of my imaginative expectations, I had made human happiness such a climax that I could not survive it. Twenty-one years of famine, dreaming, renunciations, detachment made realization a dangerous and overwhelming consummation. *All my wishes are being realized*. My joy is so great when I contemplate all I have been given that *I feel prepared for death*. I told Hugo I was like a woman on a deathbed, with all my loved ones around me. Closeness to all.[42]

Thus a small, indirect gesture of acceptance and statement of suffering by her father led Nin to a powerful fantasy of a superabundant family all focused on her.

In a sense, *Mamma Mia!* brings that vision of a superabundant, loving family to life, but here it is not a deathbed, but the altar in the church which serves as the focal point of the fantasy. And while Nin felt the magnitude of her joy could only mean the end of life, Sophie feels the end of a certain era in her life and is, as it were, reborn, now being prepared to finally separate herself from her mother – the island, with the mother on it, and the need to leave and get to the mainland offers a powerful symbol of separation, or birthing – *and* a 'surfeit of fathers'.[43] Where before the cancelled wedding her main focus had been on discovering her father, afterwards her chief desire is to explore the world with Sky, whose name may be intended to evoke newly dawning possibilities.

Nin and her father, attempting to make up for 'twenty-one years of famine' as quickly as possible, embarked on an accelerated drive toward intimacy which quickly became sexual. Yet Nin's craving for closeness was, paradoxically, also a longing for liberation from her need of a father, as Otto Rank astutely recognized: she needed to possess her father before she could reject him.

Jennifer in *Blame it on Rio* has similarly to work through a sexual relationship with her 'father figure' before feeling its inadequacy and attaining liberation. The intensity of 'the realization of the impossibility of meeting on earth except as man and woman, in the completeness of sex', in these cases directly signalled by sex, is in *Mamma Mia!* also, but indirectly signalled by sex, as this essay has argued.

It is not just that Sophie's longing for her father, acting like some powerful aphrodisiac, brings together Donna and Sam, Rosie and Bill, Tanya and Pepper, and – in the movie – Harry and his young man. It also leads Sophie herself to those fantasies of being her mother, with the sexual element encoded in the ravishing scene, her possible fathers' attraction to the young siren, the explicit reference to Oedipus, the 'Aphrodite's Fountain' locale, and the implicit evocation of Myrrha. It also explains why Johnson, a little awkwardly, tries to keep intergenerational desire, so destructive in her earlier plays, at arm's length.

At the same time, the nature of Johnson's plot, with the three possible fathers, manages to defuse this intensity, so that, although Sophie's relationship with all three older men is made to feel more consequential than her lightly sketched relationship with Sky,

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none of them supplants him as Sophie's most important man. The continuing uncertainty as to which of the older men is the father also has the effect of delaying the moment of '*unbearable* joy' to so late in the narrative that the moment of complete possession and that of complete liberation almost precisely coincide.

Johnson is, in fact, able to combine these psychological themes in a way that leaves the ending surprisingly open. Is Sophie happy because she has three fathers, or because she now realizes she does not need a father at all? This is left to the audience to decide, but following the sort of Nin narrative employed here, the most significant part of the conclusion is that Sophie clearly shuns the sort of emotionally turbocharged father–daughter encounter that she had longed for in her years of 'famine'.

Notes and References

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2. Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin, 1931–1934* (London: Peter Owen, 1966), p. 278.
3. Press release, June 2019.
4. Helen Deborah Lewis, '"With a Bit of Rock Music, Everything is Fine": *Mamma Mia!* and the Camp Sensibility on Screen', in George Rodosthenous, ed., *Twenty-First-Century Musicals: from Stage to Screen* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 123.
5. *Rag Doll* has not been published, but there is a typescript in the Bristol Old Vic Collection, BOV 3, University of Bristol Theatre Collection.
6. Catherine Johnson, *Boys Mean Business* in *Bush Theatre Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 90.
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10. Catherine Johnson, *Mamma Mia!*, 'Cast Script, and Vocal Book', 1999, p. 7 <www.scribd.com/doc/140818692/Mamma-Mia-the-Musical-Script>.
11. George Rodosthenous, '*Mamma Mia!* and the Aesthetics of the Twenty-First-Century Jukebox Musical', in Robert Gordon and Olaf Jubin, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the British Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 622.
12. Johnson, 1999, p. 47.
13. Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, *More Abba Gold* (London: Wise Publications, 1993), p. 88.
14. Nin, 1993, p. 157.
15. *Mamma Mia! The Movie*, dir. Phyllida Lloyd, DVD (Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008).
16. For a wide-reaching study of the figure of the siren across time and different cultures, see Linda Phyllis Austern and Inna Naroditskaya, ed., *Music of the Sirens* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
17. Johnson, 1999, p. 20.
18. In his account of 'Sexuality in Swearing', Geoffrey Hughes notes that '*Minx*, of obscure origin, is used of a pet dog from *c.* 1540, a pert girl or hussy from *c.* 1592 and a whore from *c.* 1598'. See *Swearing: a Social History of Foul Language, Oaths, and Profanity in English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 222. Although the most popular definition of 'minx' on the user-generated *Urban Dictionary* is currently 'cheeky or mischievous girl', the second most popular is 'an alluring, cunning, or boldly flirtatious girl or young woman. Has unusual seductive powers . . . ', and the fourth is 'a seductive, sexy woman or girl of loose morals' <www.urbandictionary.com>.
19. Sarah Godfrey, 'The Hero of My Dreams: Framing Fatherhood in *Mamma Mia!*', in Louise FitzGerald and Melanie Williams, ed., *Exploring a Cultural Phenomenon: 'Mamma Mia!' The Movie* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), p. 193.
20. Nin, 1993, p. 209. Nin herself later gives the translation 'I have lost God' (p. 212).
21. Johnson, 1999, p. 38.
22. Sue Harper, 'Afterword: When All is Said and Done', in Louise FitzGerald and Melanie Williams, ed., p. 225.
23. Johnson, 1999, p. 38.
24. Pauline Kael, 'The Current Cinema', *New Yorker*, 20 February 1984, p. 115.
25. Johnson, 2008. For convenience, I quote these conversations from the movie version, but they are not significantly different from the equivalents in the stage musical.
26. Catherine Johnson *et al.*, 'The Show: the Saga of *Mamma Mia!*', in *Mamma Mia! How Can I Resist You? The Inside Story of 'Mamma Mia!' and the Songs of Abba* (London: Phoenix Illustrated), p. 143.
27. Godfrey, p. 202.
28. Johnson, 1999, p. 29.
29. Malcolm Womack,'"Thank You for the Music": Catherine Johnson's Feminist Revoicings in *Mamma Mia!*', *Studies in Musical Theatre*, III (2009), p. 209.
30. Louise FitzGerald, 'What Does Your Mother Know? *Mamma Mia!*'s Mediation of Lone Motherhood', in Louise FitzGerald and Melanie Williams, ed., p. 207.
31. Johnson, 2008. The conversation is more or less the same in the stage musical: see Johnson, 1999, p. 56–7.
32. Johnson *et al*, 2008, p. 184.
33. Johnson, 1999, p. 56.
34. I have seen the London production three times, in 2008, 2013, and 2016.
35. Father–daughter incest is by far the most common variety of incest. See Judith Lewis Herman and Lisa Hirschman, *Father–Daughter Incest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 18.
36. Johnson, 1999, p. 79.
37. *Blame it on Rio*, dir. Stanley Donen, DVD (MGM/TGG Direct, 2010).
38. Johnson, 2008.
39. Nin, 1993, p. 169.
40. Johnson, 1999, p. 80.
41. Nin, 1993, p. 111.
42. Ibid, p. 112.
43. Godfrey, p. 199.

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