

“Mother? Daughter? Dancing Queen? :

Embracing a conflicted Feminist vision in *Mamma Mia!*”

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My world changed significantly in three ways in the last two years. Just under two years ago I gave birth to my first child, a baby girl. About 18 months ago, my mother retired and moved over 1,000 miles from her lifelong home in order to live in the same town as my husband, my daughter, and me. And about 6 months ago, I saw *Mamma Mia!* for the first time. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which these three “events”: becoming a mother myself, while reuniting with my own mother, and seeing a Broadway production, represent a confluence of concerns about my own feminist ideology, my roles as mother and as daughter, and my inner “Dancing Queen”.

The film and stage versions of *Mamma Mia!* offer various and positive representations of strong women, of vital female friendships, of mother/daughter relationships, and of romantic attractions – both gay and straight. Additionally, there is a certain fairy tale quality to the story: the “lost” princess gets her wish, finding not one but three fathers, and realizes that she need only seek her own independence to be happy. One might also consider the Shakespearean comedic tone or the cultural

influences of Jane Austen on the characters and plot. In this paper, however, I'd like to look closely at a few specific scenes from the film in order to examine ideas of performativity and generational feminism. It occurs to me that a large part of the *Mamma Mia!* Party of the past ten plus years has to do with the delicate balance the production strikes between celebration and conflict – a balance that many contemporary Feminists often seem unable to maintain, a balance that I struggle with in my career and in my own socially proscribed and personally embraced gender roles.

“How I arrived at the Mamma Mia! party...”

In the Summer of 2008, my mother called, raving about Meryl Streep's new film, *Mamma Mia!*. Mom had gone to see the movie with friends from work, and they'd loved the entire thing – the setting, the songs, the performances, both scripted and musical, and the viewing audience's energy – to say nothing of one Pierce Brosnan. For Christmas that year, I bought mom the DVD set, and for her birthday the year after, we purchased tickets to the touring Broadway production. In the meantime, I had given birth to a daughter of my own, and my mother had retired from her career in Oklahoma and moved to South Carolina in order to celebrate the new granddaughter. As the months passed, I observed *Mamma Mia!* mania in both popular and social ways. For example, one afternoon, shopping at the local bookstore, I found myself singing along to “Dancing Queen” as it played over the store's music system. This surprised me; I hadn't realized that I knew the words. I was more surprised to look around and realize that nearly every other woman, and many girls, within my eye line were singing along too. Several of us locked eyes, grinned sheepishly, and continued on with our communal karaoke. This communal performance was repeated again, in the Spring of

2010, when I accompanied my mother to the stage production and got my first full taste of *Mamma Mia!*. As we approached the theater, women of all ages streamed into the venue, chattering and laughing, hanging on one another's arms and clearly, it seemed to me, preparing for a celebratory evening. Several multi-generational and social groups were evident in the audience – Mothers and Daughters, Grandmothers and Mothers and Daughters, Red Hat Clubs, Sorority sisters, including only a few men sprinkled throughout the 2500 seat auditorium. Certainly this was a woman-centered event. Suffice it to say, after experiencing the show for myself (I laughed, I cried, I sang along, I tried to follow the hand motions, I hugged my Mom), my world had shifted a bit. As a novice ABBAphile, I did what you are supposed to do: I invested in a copy of the film soundtrack *and* the ABBA Gold album; I DVR'd the movie; I found myself using ABBA lyrics to update my Facebook status; I started conversations with the question: Is there *anything* Meryl Streep can't do?

As an academic and a popular culture scholar, I could not let this pass. Obviously, my enjoyment of this production, both stage and film, had, at its heart, a significance worth probing a bit. Why on earth would I find this bit of pop music fluff, with its razor thin plot and players who are easily reduced to caricature, if not outright cartoons (“Oh, she’s the brittle, oft-augmented divorcee”, and “oh, she’s the asexual earth mother”) so very engaging? And, frankly, months later, I still don’t have a clear answer to that question. I generally prefer more serious and perhaps more nuanced representations of women’s lives, of our culture, and our experiences. And yet... I’ll admit, unabashedly, that I loved this musical. Loved it. And I think I loved it for

Feminist reasons, reasons which may seem as razor thin as the plot, but which cut sharply nonetheless.

And this leads me to the issue of performativity. In a variety of places, Judith Butler, our own dancing queen of *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*, has suggested that gender roles in contemporary society are a function of performed acts – acts that women, men, and the transgendered, all negotiate as we move through cultural and social spaces. Butler has suggested that there is agency available for the act-or, through the function of recognizing the roles to which one is tied, that the very nature of recognizing oneself as an actor allows for moments of change or evolution or at least, challenge. These moments of change, per se, require an awareness on the part of the actor; we must recognize our own performativity in order to control our own destinies. This is, it seems to me, both a personal and communal action, this action of recognizing our agency. To return to *Mamma Mia!*, a musical production is, obviously, hinged on the act of performativity – a blending of media (both drama and, in this case, a pop music/rock concert), a blending of genre traditions – is it fairy tale? Is it Shakespearean comedy? Is it simply a “Chick Flick”, (that reductive and problematic term with which many have scholars have already dealt)?

In “From Chick Flicks to Millennial Blockbusters: Spinning Female-Driven Narratives into Franchises”, Ashley Elaine York, in her discussion of *Mamma Mia!* and *Sex and the City*, both films were released in 2008, suggests that: “The new woman’s film is defined by a combination of elements of women’s films from over the decades; for example they continue to be tough on topics of consumerism, romance, beauty, and escape; however, overriding this subject matter is a theme of validation”(4). I would like

to spend a moment exploring this issue of validation in the plot of *Mamma Mia!* And then pursue the idea of validation through the lens of public performative acts.

The plot of the piece centers on 20 year old Sophie Sheridan's desire to know who her father is before she herself gets married. Her mother, Donna, has raised Sophie on her own, while running a now-dilapidated inn on a small Greek island. We're meant to understand, early on, both Donna's independence and her struggle. The first song that Donna sings addresses her need for money and her frustration that the simplest way to achieve economic stability centers on attaching herself to a man - The song's chorus hinges on the line: "It's a rich man's world!". Sophie has read her mother's diary, learned of three affairs in quick succession the summer she was conceived, and she's invited all three subjects of her mother's one-time affection to the wedding. When all three one-time suitors arrive at the island, their arrival marks the arrival of, literally, The Patriarchy. Both women react to the Patriarchy in a comic, if marginalizing fashion: Sophie relegates the men to the Goat House, while Donna subsequently expels them off the island all together. Donna is mortified that her past has presented itself in such a literal and problematic fashion on the eve of her daughter's wedding. In her frustration with the situation, Donna calls herself a "stupid reckless little slut" for having slept with three men in a matter of weeks, leaving her unsure as to which one has fathered Sophie. Donna's two best friends, Tanya and Rosie, also on the island for the wedding, burst into laughter at Donna's self-flagellation, suggesting that it is absurd for her to punish herself so. This distress, leads Rosie and Tanya, the two best friends, to serenade Donna with ABBA's "Dancing Queen", which perks up Donna, and the locals, even if it doesn't solve her stressful situation.

I would like to spend a moment here, considering this scene, which suggests both the power of female friendship and the liberating power of public performance. As Donna's friends serenade her with ABBA's "Dancing Queen", Donna cycles through emotions of initial horror at their performance (she hides her head under her bedsheets) through tentative union with her friends as she dons a feather boa to compliment their outrageous costumes and on into actual communal performance, as the three leads dance and prance their way through the village, gathering co-performers along the way, until, at the song's end, apparently all of the women of the island, minus Sophie, choose to jump off the pier, into the water, in celebration of their inner Dancing Queens.

Now, is this scene ham-fisted? Yes. From the local women who step away from feeding their men, removing their aprons, putting down their burdens to Rosie and Tanya's utilization of artifacts of modern femininity around Donna's room... They sing into hair dryers, deodorant, lotions, and their costumes invite absurd sexuality – a tasseled bra over a man's Hawaiian shirt? The can-can skirt pulled up over Tanya's chest? And consider Streep's Donna as Pied Piper, drawing together women, young and old, to dance along with Benny Anderson's benevolent piano playing, to lead her merry band in a rousing version of air guitar, before they all jump off the pier. Is this a baptism? A rebirth? A cleansing? Are we washing away the years? The patriarchy? The Catholic guilt referred to earlier in the scene? Does it even matter when we're having this much fun??? Re-enter Judith Butler's notions of performativity: if we feel better thanks to singing and dancing with friends and strangers alike, if we find comfort in jumping on our bed, prancing across a courtyard, jumping in the ocean, if we recognize our inner 17 year old, as the song suggests, and not just embrace but

celebrate her – doesn't that represent an act of agency? Rather than further castigating herself for decisions made more than 20 years ago, isn't Donna creating a new space for herself through the song, much as she created a new space with the inn on the island?

The question is not closed, however, for Sophie, Donna's daughter. Later in the production, as she's dealing with the stress of meeting her potential fathers, and not knowing, immediately, which one is her biological dad as she thought she would, Sophie rages against her mother:

Sophie: "You never had a wedding. You never did the marriage and babies thing. You just did the baby thing. Well, good for you!"

Donna: "You know, I don't know why you're going off on me now..."

Sophie: "Because! I don't want my children growing up not knowing who their father is, because it's just, it's CRAP!"

This exchange is important, not just for the dramatic tension of the piece, but for establishing, again, the potential power of Donna's guilt for her decision not to marry, to raise Sophie on her own. Despite the fact that Donna has provided for her daughter, has modeled economic and romantic independence, has created a self-sufficient female space in which Sophie could grow, we see the younger generation chaffing at what she didn't have: a "traditional" household with a patriarchal figure. She misses the "knowledge" of the patriarchy, if not the relationship. Additionally, Sophie is choosing - pushing, actually - to marry at age 20, an act which the older generation, Donna and her friends, and each of the potential fathers, finds nearly absurd. Why would someone so

“young” wish to marry? Why wouldn’t she want to see the world, experience everything it offers? Why, in short, would she choose to be so “traditional”?

Keeping in mind York’s earlier assertion of validation for the female subject, I would like to point us to one final scene in the film. As Sophie’s wedding has begun in the tiny church, Donna interrupts to admit to Sophie that her father is in the audience, but that she, Donna, doesn’t know which man that is. The admission of promiscuity, of literal ignorance, of guilt, uttered in the church, in front of the priest, certainly takes on the trappings of a confession. Donna begs Sophie’s forgiveness: “Please, please forgive me! Please forgive me. Please.” While Sophie’s response: “I don’t care if you slept with hundreds of men.” is played for laughs – cut to close up of the priest looking uncomfortable – her following statement: “You’re my mom, and I love you so much.” allows for Donna’s absolution. Donna finds absolution, but not at the hands of the patriarchy or the priest. Instead, Sophie’s declaration, her performative utterance “You’re my mom!” is where we see Donna’s validation. Sophie’s declaration, in the church, no less, that she doesn’t care if her mother slept with hundreds of men, represents Donna opportunity to forgive herself, releasing herself from the cultural and social constraints still placed on a woman 20 years after the actions in question. This act of validation, of recognition, is central to the piece and, I think, is part of why the stage and film productions resonate so with audiences. The younger generation, represented in Sophie, may desire a different path for herself, but she does so without wholesale rejection of the previous generation’s decisions.

While there are a number of additional feminist themes and feminist conflicts to consider within the film, such as the cross-generational flirting between Tanya and

Pepper that culminates in the song “Does your mother know?” (a song originally sung by Bjorn Ulvaeus to a young woman, but gender bent in this production to represent a middle-aged woman’s rejection of youth in favor of solidarity?), such as the presence of women’s bodies in a way that is celebratory rather than objectified, such as the creative force behind the stage and film productions being three middle aged women: written by Catherine Johnson, directed by Phyllida Lloyd, produced by Judy Cramer, such as the fact on the DVD extras that Stellan Skarsgaard suggests: “And this film is written, produced, and directed and designed by women, which means that we three men, we are the bimbos in the film . . . Being a man on this production makes you understand how women usually feel – totally objectified” (note: this line is delivered as he’s being sewn into his rhinestone jumpsuit). While each of these and many more would allow for additional Feminist considerations regarding the production, I remain most charmed by the act of generational re-connection.

In 2004, Lisa Jervis, founder of *Bitch* magazine, expressed, in an essay for *MS*, her frustration at the generational conflicts between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists. Jervis outlines the generalities of debates between the generations as she writes: “The rap goes something like this: Older women drained their movement of sexuality; younger women are uncritically sexualized. Older women won’t recognize the importance of pop culture; younger women are obsessed with media representation. Older women have too narrow a definition of what makes a feminist issue; younger women are scattered and don’t know what’s important. Stodgy versus frivolous. Won’t share power versus spoiled and ignorant.” While these are not necessarily the conflicts presented in Johnson’s script, Jervis’ list offers a similarity to Donna’s and Sophie’s tensions: what

one wants, the other rejected – they've not been honest with each other in their desires – and the world the elder generation created, is not the place the younger generation wishes to reside. Jervis goes on to suggest that the generational divide in Feminism is an illusion, attributable, in part, to members of both generation who are unwilling to look critically at one another, to be thoughtful in our consideration of one another.

This brings me back, as a viewer, to Sophie's "You're my mother!" declaration in the church. Her previous obsession with the patriarchy, at the end of the production, she decides she would rather not know which man is her biological father, is replaced with reconnection with her mother. This production offers us an iconic connective event; it is a marker by which we can connect, through which we can remember, and over which we can bond. We are free to dance, to sing, to be at once 17 and 37 and 57 – we are free to be mother, and daughter, and dancing queen. And as a mother, and as a daughter, and as a Feminist, I embrace these connections; I hope to recognize the validity of my mother's journey and to support the new directions of my daughter's choice. I stand here, between the two, mostly just humming along to "Dancing Queen"...

## Works Cited

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