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"Masked Kidnappers": Representing Adoptive Mothers, 1939–2010

CLAUDIA NELSON

ABSTRACT: Using as my central texts Mary Elizabeth Counselman's story "Mommy" (1939), Agatha Christie's *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958), and the Disney animation *Tangled* (2010), I trace how representations of adoptive mothers function to express concern first about the power of mothers more generally, and subsequently about disparities based on social and/or national difference. By contemplating the historical contexts for the negative visions of adoptive maternity evident in these texts, we may see how attacks on adoption can stand in for criticisms of much larger aspects of the dominant culture.

KEYWORDS: Agatha Christie, Mary Elizabeth Counselman, *Tangled* (Disney film), adoptive motherhood, social concern about adoption

IN HER 1945 book *The Psychology of Women,* the Austrian-born American psychoanalyst Helene Deutsch includes a chapter on adoptive mothers. While she concedes that not all adoptive mothers are pathological, Deutsch nonetheless takes a critical tone toward her subjects, leveling at them various serious charges. First, their failure to bear children indicates psychological problems such as fear of sex. Second, and apparently unlike biological mothers, they project their own neuroses onto their adoptive children. Third, because they suffer from a syndrome that she terms "masked kidnaperism [*sic*]" (422), they are plagued by "tormenting ideas

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. . . really justified, about the robbed, competing, devaluated, and, above all, 'unknown' natural mother" (415). And finally, their own psychic sickness underlies any maladjusted behavior in which the adopted child may subsequently engage, up to and including the murder of the adoptive mother. Deutsch warns that the bad adoptive mother endangers society.

Like another influential piece of American cultural commentary, Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (1942) and its famous diatribe against "Momism" (identified as a desire on the part of overbearing American women to control and emasculate their men), Deutsch's work is part of a backlash against the Victorian tendency to exalt mothers as icons of purity and influence. Whereas many nineteenth-century commentators happily ascribed enormous moral power to mothers, deeming them naturally self-sacrificing because they had braved pregnancy and childbirth for the sake of their offspring, later generations were inclined to agree with Wylie that mothers might be overrated—not least by themselves. For midcentury psychologists, mothers were often toxic: whether "smother mothers" (overly attached parents blamed for their offspring's asthma or immaturity) or "refrigerator mothers" (insufficiently attached parents blamed for their offspring's autism or schizophrenia), mothers were likely to be behind children's medical, sexual, or social deviance.[1] Yet simultaneously, Victorian respect for women who had borne and raised children remained an important cultural factor. Deutsch's solution to the dilemma of how to criticize mothers without giving undue offense was to be particularly hard on the adoptive mother; because she is not a "real" mother (one who has given birth to the child she is raising), the adoptive mother becomes the scapegoat for the presumed sins of mothers more generally. As this article will demonstrate, authors of mass-market fiction in the mid-twentieth century—my examples are the American journalist Mary Elizabeth Counselman in her short story "Mommy" (1939) and Agatha Christie in *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958)—may be seen translating into narrative the concerns about adoptive motherhood that Deutsch expresses as scientific truths.

Today, our anxieties are expressed less in psychological terms than in terms of race, class, and geopolitics. Yet the directing of attention to very real issues of inequality, coercion of birth mothers, commodification of children, and instances of profiteering in the adoption industry does not mean that the psyches of adoptive mothers are no longer a focus for cultural concern in the US and elsewhere in the West; it is still the case that, as Katarina Wegar pointed out in the 1990s, "adoptive mothers, despite their comparatively privileged social position, have been portrayed as inadequate mothers who are likely to cause or at least perpetuate mental health problems in their adopted children" (78). The midcentury psychological discourse has not disappeared but continues to inflect expressions of anxiety about adoptive motherhood even while the ground for these expressions has shifted. The second half of my article considers the Walt Disney Company's animated feature *Tangled* (2010), an updating of the fears on display in the popular

texts that I have selected from earlier decades. *Tangled,* as we shall see, contains its own psychological discourse, while responses from the film's adult viewers also serve to illuminate the extent to which concerns about inequality, class, and the vulnerability of the family have been added to the substratum of concern about mothering itself. I seek to draw attention to how antipathy toward adoption can sometimes function as a stalking horse for other kinds of anxieties: here, initially about the power of mothers, but subsequently about disparities based on social and/or national difference. While Deutsch's explication of maternal psychology, Counselman's ghost story, Christie's whodunit, and Disney's film emanate from different genres and cultural milieus and address different groups, each text furthers a negative vision of the adoptive mother. By bearing in mind the changing historical contexts for these negative visions, we may see how the rise of the idea "that adoption per se placed children at risk for emotional disturbance and psychopathology" (Herman 253)[2] may be understood as not exclusively a worry about the wellbeing of children. Rather, much as Deutsch addressed to adoptive mothers some criticisms that she might have been reluctant to address to mothers tout court, attacks on adoption can stand in for criticisms of much larger aspects of the dominant culture.

Psychology and "Mommy"

A concern with psychology was a hallmark of attempts in the mid-twentieth-century US to shape, regulate, and police adoption. Ellen Herman discusses adoption workers' rapid embrace of psychology as a tool; she also shows how the scope for the use of that tool widened. In the second half of the nineteenth century, American adoption had rested largely upon the idea that the adoptable child was the person in need of help, an assumption that enabled such phenomena as the "orphan trains" that, as late as 1929, carried poor urban children from the North to new homes in the rural Midwest and South, placing the "orphans" (many of whom had living biological parents) with new caregivers whose motivations received little scrutiny. But as child placement increasingly came to be seen not as a form of employment in which children traded labor for food, shelter, education, and training but as an emotional exchange, both children and would-be adoptive parents came to be seen as therapeutic subjects (Herman 93).

Similarly, Brian Paul Gill notes that mid-twentieth-century American adoption agencies, increasingly convinced that parents interested in adopting might be suffering from mental or emotional illness, sought to place children only with families "who were psychologically ideal" (162).[3] This status was to be determined by interviews and investigation that constituted a kind of speed psychoanalysis, since "a full understanding of personality required a look behind a client's public demeanor and stated motivations." Accordingly, adoption workers prided them-

selves, as one put it in 1937, on being better equipped than the prospective parents to become "conscious of what motivates [the parents'] actions" (168). Such consciousness required a fine sense of gradations, since the boundary between the normal and the pathological was marked by degree rather than by kind. For instance, while agencies recognized that infertility was the most common (and thus most acceptable) motivation for adoption, a 1956 study of adoption practices noted that "the drive to adopt" should nonetheless be "quite free of desperate attempts to still the pain of childlessness" (169), as adoption worker Abraham Simon put it.

The rhetoric of psychology also permeates Counselman's, Christie's, and Disney's texts, albeit in different ways, and invoking this rhetoric helped at least the first two to imply that their ideas about adoption and maternal psychology were grounded in the latest scientific research. Published in the popular science fiction–fantasy magazine *Weird Tales* in April 1939 and written by an author who was a frequent contributor to *Weird Tales* but also to mainstream magazines such as *Collier's, The Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping,* and *Ladies' Home Journal,* Counselman's "Mommy" tells the story of a childless widow who visits an orphanage to pick out a child. Although in "shopping for a daughter," as she confesses to herself that she is doing (128), Mrs. Ellison is initially drawn to more attractive children, her interest is piqued by the little outsider Martha, who is said to suffer from a strange "complex" (130): she believes that her birth mother is keeping her deathbed promise to remain present to shield her daughter from harm. Indeed, as the orphanage matron admits, there is evidence that this belief may be well founded, since various unexplained events have occurred to support the idea that some supernatural force may be seeking to secure Martha's happiness and wellbeing. Mrs. Ellison places little stock in these reports. Declaring in the confident tones of a psychologist, "That fixation has been nourished too long in the child's mind. But a home, some new toys and a little affection will make her forget that nonsense" (132), she buys Martha a pretty dress and a puppy and takes her home from the orphanage. On the way, however, their lives are threatened by an inexplicably runaway truck. Mrs. Ellison can do nothing to elude it, but Martha has the solution; she calls upon her birth mother for help, whereupon the truck miraculously brakes. Faced with this evidence, Mrs. Ellison, who was already conscious of a "presence" guarding Martha's other side, acknowledges the continued existence and potency of Martha's birth mother. Henceforth, the mothers will be allies.

Just as there are two mothers in this story, there are two strands of language. One conversation is self-consciously scientific, full of words that invoke the popular Freudianism of the period, such as "fixation" and "complex." The other is an antiscientific discourse of the supernatural; Counselman establishes it via words such as "strange," "queer," and "weirdly." Meanwhile, a more generic term, "problem," could be said to fit either the story's ghost discourse or its competing psychological discourse. Yet the true hinge between the two is the word "uncanny," employed by the orphanage matron immediately after her use of the psychological

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term "complex" (130). Freud's connection of the phenomenon of the "uncanny" with the phenomenon of the double suggests that adoption, which necessarily involves the doubling of at least one parental role as adoptive parent overlays birth parent, is always potentially eerie. Thus while the story toys with (and rejects) the possibility that Martha is psychologically disturbed and simultaneously locates uncanniness in Martha's birth mother, the feeling of wrongness is actually experienced by the two women who take a maternal stance toward Martha, namely the orphanage matron and Mrs. Ellison. Martha, after all, is not conscious of anything uncanny in her birth mother's continued presence in her life; from her point of view, Mommy's love is normal and natural. It is Mommy's replacements who find their position uncomfortable and seek to repress their awareness of the evidence that she may still be an active force.

Mrs. Ellison, in particular, is instantly conscious of her rivalry with Martha's birth mother. Telling the child, "You must call *me* your mommy, dear, because you'll be my own little girl tomorrow," Mrs. Ellison silently curses "that selfish hysterical woman, dying on her hospital cot! She had left a mark on this wistful credulous baby that time could not erase!" (133). The adoptive mother's resentment of the birth mother, however, is interpretable as a mark of her own pathology, since it seems motivated not by a crime on the birth mother's part but rather by her virtue. Although Martha is illegitimate, the daughter of "a drunken sailor, most probably, . . . [and] a cheap dance-hall hostess," her birth "seemed to bring out the best in her [mother]—a fierce maternal instinct" that caused the latter to "change . . . her mode of living at once, [get] . . . a job in the mill, and literally kill . . . herself working for her child" (129). In other words, it is not the birth mother's shady past but her devotion to her daughter that angers Mrs. Ellison, who "hated that first one who stood between them like an invisible wall, in spite of everything she could do" (133). Barbara Melosh documents in the adoption practices of Counselman's moment a marked reluctance (which was to vanish after the Second World War) to separate even an unwed birth mother from her child; although they were "acutely aware of the narrow confines of single mothers' lives and the bleak future that their children often faced," the prewar social workers encountered in Melosh's archival researches "were even less sanguine about the prospects of children dependent on the kindness of strangers" (30). While death has already brought about Martha's separation from her birth mother, Mrs. Ellison seems painfully aware of her own second-class status as someone who, because she has not given birth to a child, cannot be presumed to have the degree of "fierce maternal instinct" with which the birth mother is credited.

Hence Mrs. Ellison finds it necessary to combat the love between birth mother and child. In this effort, she sees her gifts to Martha as the "weapons" that will enable her to "lay forever the ghost of Martha's 'mommy'" (133), not as uncomplicated attempts to build a family or make the child happy. Her ultimate acquiescence in the adoption triangle composed of Martha, Mommy, and "Mother" (as she will

henceforth be known)—"Let's you and I and . . . and Mommy go along home," she proposes in the story's final line (134)—is a happy but uncanny ending, an acceptance of an unnatural situation (the existence, and even the right to existence, of ghosts) that Deutsch might read as expressing the adoptive mother's neurotic guilt "about the robbed, competing, devaluated, and, above all, 'unknown' natural mother" (415). Mommy has been made literally invisible here, but she has not been erased or rendered impotent; indeed, she may be not only the source of rescue from the truck but also the reason that the truck becomes a menace at all.

That the danger forces Mrs. Ellison to confront her own inadequacy, her inability to protect Martha, is a lesson at once horrific and therapeutic. Coming to terms with this ghost is difficult, but the story suggests that it is the only way for the adoptive mother to understand and occupy her own position in the newly constituted family. The two strands of language are brought into harmony by the denouement: Mrs. Ellison has made psychological progress, coming to a new sense of her place as an adoptive mother, and this awareness has been enabled not by the Freudian uncanny but by the supernatural uncanny. Given the story's publication venue, one might read the triumph of the lowbrow (the victory of the disreputable working-class biological mother, the dismissal of the adoptive mother's easy assumptions about "fixations" and "complexes") as asserting the inadequacies of socially privileged Freudian discourse. At the same time, one may also read the story psychologically as an extended metaphor about the anxieties of an adoptive mother who comes to the orphanage already suffering from guilt about her part in its inmates' commodification. Yet if Mommy is the cause of the truck's rampage, readers may well be disturbed by her readiness to traumatize her child in order to stage a rescue that will establish her status. That we may legitimately suspect her culpability reflects an awareness that mother-love can be frightening—which in turn hints that the criticism of Mrs. Ellison may function as a screen for a criticism of maternity directed not just toward adoptive or working-class mothers but toward all mothers. After all, at the end of the story, the wealthy Mrs. Ellison and the impoverished Mommy are allies and coparents—an ending presented as the triumph of the uncanny.

Smother-Love and *Ordeal by Innocence*

Catherine Rymph reports that in the mid-twentieth century, American foster mothers risked having the children entrusted to them recalled by social services if the mothers were thought to be getting too emotional; by the terms of their "employment," love was not supposed to enter into the arrangement. Similarly, Julie Berebitsky observes that by the 1920s, single adoptive mothers sometimes combated allegations about their inferiority to married adoptive couples by suggesting that they might be more educated psychologically, readier to provide a scientific up-

bringing, and thus in control of their maternal instincts in ways that married women, and perhaps even married men, were not (118). Like Counselman's depiction of Mommy and the runaway truck, Rymph's and Berebitsky's studies illuminate an anxiety associated with motherhood in the mid-twentieth century, namely that the maternal drive makes women too emotionally intense to be ideal parents. Thus John B. Watson's influential 1928 child-care manual *Psychological Care of Infant and Child* features a chapter entitled "The Danger of Too Much Mother Love"; he and his British counterpart Truby King exalted an antiseptic, rigidly scheduled approach and decried the "overkissed" child (Watson 71), and Maxine Margolis notes that Watson expressed the wish "'that it were possible to rotate mothers occasionally' in order to avoid the development of excessive affection between mother and child" (52–53).

Although the idea of "rotating mothers" is one to which fostering and adoption might be said to speak, Christie's *Ordeal by Innocence* suggests that scientific adoptive parenting and "smother-love" can go hand in hand, since both are manifestations of an excess on the part of the adoptive mother that twentieth-century critics such as Wylie ascribed to nonadoptive mothers. This novel, which also addresses 1950s anxieties about juvenile delinquency by linking male criminality and rebelliousness to adoption, was one of Christie's favorites among her works. At its center is murder victim Rachel Argyle, American by birth but long resident in England, who is dead by the time the novel starts but whose story and pathology continue to shape events. We learn that before and during the evacuations associated with the London Blitz, Rachel surrounded herself with deprived children in one of the "desperate attempts to still the pain of childlessness" that Simon decried in 1956. Providing her charges with a Swedish masseuse and two hospital nurses, a diet with "their milk sterilized and the water tested and their calories weighed and their vitamins computed" (83), a rigid schedule, and every luxury, Rachel asserted her maternal excellence in contrast to the children's birth mothers, who included prostitutes, nymphomaniacs, and fallen women. At war's end, Rachel adopted four of her charges, Hester, Micky, Jacko, and Tina, adding them to the family inaugurated by her prewar adoption of Mary, a tenement girl knocked over on a New York City street by Rachel's car. Like the discussion of socioeconomic status in "Mommy," the image of the car—presumably an expensive one, since Rachel is an heiress—running down the working-class child points to a class discrepancy in adoption that remains important today; however, in both midcentury texts the psychological discourse overshadows the class thread as apparent motivator for the action.

In all five cases, the working-class or declassed birth parents or caregivers are described as unworthy; all are said to have been happy to shed responsibility for the youngsters, selling them to Rachel for modest sums or simply leaving the country without providing a forwarding address. Yet with only one exception, Rachel's mothering efforts either fail to elicit an answering emotion from their objects or call

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forth not love but resentment. Just as Deutsch might predict, one of the now-adult children, Jacko, has incited Rachel's murder, a predictable solution given the era's worries about "bad seed" children and social deviance among young men.[4] The novel suggests that while Jacko is certainly to blame for the tragedy, the root cause of the crime is Rachel's inability to recognize and cope with the personalities around her, a problem here associated with adoptive parenthood. Made overconfident by her shrewdness in business matters and by the forceful personality and class privilege that have left few of her desires unfulfilled, Rachel assumes that she has the same talent for motherhood that she has for assessing investments. As her husband puts it, Rachel has failed to understand that whereas "There is usually something in one's own children, some kink of temperament, some way of feeling that you recognise and can understand," with adopted children "One has no *instinctive* knowledge of what goes on in their minds" (194).

Toward the end of the investigation, the detective, Dr. Calgary, concludes that "the dead woman . . . was not really important. *Any* victim, in a sense, would have done" (259). Yet the facts of the case belie this claim: not only was Rachel's death convenient for Jacko, but at the time she was also the only person whom Jacko's agent, the Swedish masseuse Kirsty, would have been willing to kill. Thus the reader must understand the statement as indirection, indeed as a repression of the unpalatable fact that Kirsty, whom Jacko had manipulated into a frenzy of sexual love for him, simultaneously retained her position as paid foster mother to all the children, so that Kirsty's murder of Rachel is a way of asserting her own maternal primacy as well as her romantic attachment to Jacko. Adoptive mothers, that is, combine the roles of victim and murderer, mother and lover, an incestuous blurring of categories with which the novel's characters are so uncomfortable that they don't hand Kirsty over to the police even after she has killed a second time.

Seeing Dr. Calgary's statement about the "unimportance" of the victim's identity as an example of repression is made easier by the narrative's insistence on popular psychological theory. The word "subconsciously" appears as early as the second page, and references to psychology, psychologists, mental kinks, delinquents as "mental invalids," and the like pepper the text. Both the narrator and many of the characters are given to pop-Freudian analyses on the order of "he had become her child as well as her husband" (33), "She was suffering . . . from a perfectly natural feeling of an adolescent young woman—resentment of authority—an attempt to escape from smother-love which is responsible for so much harm nowadays" (112), "They'd have a word for [Kirsty] in the modern jargon. Repressed spinster" (120), and, in a diagnosis of displacement provided to the Argyles' living son by his adoptive sister and eventual fiancée, "It was not Mrs. Argyle you hated, Micky, it was your own mother" (172).

While all the statements just quoted describe characters other than Rachel, it is Rachel who is at the center of the novel's psychologizing, and specifically Rachel in her role as adoptive mother, a role in which she is a lightning rod for cultural

attacks on maternity itself. We learn that "As i[s] the case with many women," her infertility was a "disability [that] gradually overshadowed the whole of her life" (50); that "with Mrs. Argyle the maternal instinct was very strong, but the physical satisfaction of bearing a child or children never came," resulting in "her maternal obsession never really slacken[ing]" (82); and that "with the acquiring of [her first child], it was as though her maternal longings were not so much fulfilled as stimulated" (100). As one might expect given the era's anxiety about overly maternal mothers, Rachel's maternal insatiability is consistently criticized, both by the family doctor and by her family members.

The children respond to it in various but uniformly disastrous ways. Jacko's delinquency is either a reminder of nature's potency over nurture or a response to Rachel's tendency to deprive her children of choice. Micky hates Rachel for removing him from his birth mother and thereby revealing the latter's indifference to him. Hester, traumatized by the discovery that she too was adopted, has indulged in acts of rebellion and in fantasies about killing Rachel. Tina willingly acquiesces in Rachel's plans for her and expresses her love for her adoptive mother, but the narrative insists that this response is inexplicable and posits that something mysterious must lie under Tina's enigmatic surface. Worst of all, oldest daughter Mary replicates Rachel's mistakes by smother-loving her husband, Philip: paralyzed by polio, he is "lapped round with [devotion]; watched over, cared for, cherished. It made one yearn for a little wholesome neglect. . . . One had, in fact, to find ways of escape" (127). His attempts to escape Mary's control make Philip the second murder victim after he indulges himself, against her wishes, in recreational detection that goes wrong.

In short, just as Deutsch would predict, the adoptive mother is psychologically damaged and damag*ing.* Along Deutschian lines, Rachel is fearful of or indifferent to sex (her husband has consequently transferred his affections to his secretary), contemptuous of her children's birth mothers,[5] and ultimately responsible for her own murder, which is instigated by her son but carried out by a simulacrum who likewise seeks, inappropriately, to put her sexual energies into her maternal duties. Kirsty complains that Rachel was "So sure of herself, benevolent, tyrannical—a kind of living walking embodiment of MOTHER KNOWS BEST. And not really even a mother!" (139). That the "tyrant" is "not really even a mother," since to "make a family by artificial means" is an endeavor whose "falseness" should be "felt instinctively," as the adoptive father puts it (104), is presented as her most serious crime.

By looking at the ways in which Christie's and Counselman's texts overlap with Deutsch's, I do not mean to suggest that either wrote with Deutsch in mind; for one thing, Counselman's story preceded Deutsch's *The Psychology of Women* by several years. Rather, I offer the two works as examples of the extent to which the figure of the adoptive mother crystallized the era's anxiety about motherhood (and in Christie's case, juvenile delinquency as well) more generally and the extent to

which mid-twentieth-century popular culture expressed its anxiety in psychological terms. If, as Berebitsky remarks, psychology was sometimes used to validate the carefully vetted adoptive home as "scientifically perfect" (154), this judgment should be seen more as a way of denigrating birth parents than as a tribute to adoption, since psychology was also used as a weapon against adoptive mothers. The anxiety about motherhood that affected both birth and adoptive mothers in the mid-twentieth century has been traced in influential feminist texts of that era, from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (see especially chapter 9 on the Othering of women) to Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* and Marina Warner's *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary.* In the context of adoption studies, this phenomenon has typically been discussed in terms of its effect on adoption practices rather than its relationship to the culture at large, but in many ways the two are inseparable. As Agate Nesaule Krouse and Margot Peters have noted, "Christie's great popularity alone indicates that she comfortably reinforces clichés" (104). The presence in these mass-market texts of the psychological discourse critiquing the adoptive mother suggests the extent to which it permeated mid-twentieth-century culture, helping to establish attitudes still potent today.

Responses to *Tangled*

I now move forward half a century to use *Tangled* to look at what has happened to the attitudes on display in Deutsch's, Counselman's, and Christie's texts. In selecting *Tangled* as my primary text for the twenty-first century, I again seek to recognize the cultural potency of the source (just as Christie remains the world's best-selling author of all time, the Walt Disney Studio is enormously successful and influential as a purveyor of children's entertainment) while simultaneously suggesting that this potency comes more from refracting widely held cultural assumptions than from being a bellwether for public opinion. Indeed, one can name any number of popular film and print texts produced between *Ordeal by Innocence* and *Tangled* that reify the stereotype of the inadequate, disturbingly intense, morally compromised, or unhinged adoptive mother. Notable examples for adults include Christina Crawford's *Mommie Dearest* (1978, filmed 1981), a tell-all memoir about her traumatic experiences as Joan Crawford's adopted daughter; Ruth Rendell's psychological thriller *The Tree of Hands* (1984, filmed 1989), which displaces responsibility for a bereaved mother's illicit acquisition of an abused working-class toddler onto her own mentally ill mother; Jeanette Winterson's Künstlerroman *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985, filmed 1990), a major focus of which is the conflict between an adoptive mother's passionate religious fundamentalism and her daughter's developing sexuality; and John Sayles's 2003 film *Casa de los Babys*, an ensemble character study about a group of privileged first-world women who

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have traveled to an unnamed South American country in an attempt to solve their own problems via adoption.

Tangled has motifs in common with all of the aforementioned narratives, but its primary address to children (and secondary address to their parents, who will be accompanying them to the theater and subsequently experiencing many iterations of the DVD) adds a layer that none of the other texts cited here could provide. Moreover, its chronological positioning in the age of the internet permits a more detailed consideration of audience response. Whereas I have paid particular attention to how the language of "Mommy" and *Ordeal by Innocence* invokes the Freudian psychology of their day, in thinking about *Tangled* I am especially interested in how the film's reception, as chronicled by individual reviewers and bloggers, reflects a shift away from a psychological approach to (adoptive) mothering to a more political one inflected by concern about geopolitics, race, and class. This shift, I contend, reflects a change not so much in adoptive mothers as in the surrounding culture, which, confronting a new set of cultural anxieties, follows the mid-twentieth century's lead by attaching these anxieties to adoptive maternity.

Certainly it is possible to read *Tangled,* as Katie Kapurch has done, as a psychologically based maternal melodrama about smother-love in which, as in Christie's novel, "'bad' mothering is still defined as showering too much attention on the daughter," and the unhealthiness of the "'unnatural' mother" is that she is "entirely dependent on the girl" (43, 45). Yet I focus on responses to the film for two reasons. First, the anxieties that *Tangled* stirs up have departed to some extent from Freudian language—although not entirely, I will argue, from Freudian concepts, and certainly not from the anxiety about adoptive mothers that this language was once used to convey. Instead, what now dominates is a guilt that appears connected to questions about what constitutes a legitimate family and whether adoption, as a practice often intimately connected to unfairness, may be said to forfeit its own claims to legitimacy. Second, my own interest in the film was sparked when, upon its release, my daughter (a transnational adoptee) and I accompanied a friend and her children to a showing. After summarizing the film's plot for those unfamiliar with it, I will comment upon my own response and then move to those of others.

Based on the Rapunzel story as told by the Brothers Grimm, *Tangled* traces its heroine's arduous separation from the witch figure "Mother Gothel," who has "raised the [stolen] child as her own" and whose crimes are presented as bad mothering, American style. In order to persuade Rapunzel to stay in her tower (where Gothel can use the girl's magic hair to ensure her own eternal youth), she attacks Rapunzel's self-confidence, in one song claiming that she is "Sloppy, underdressed, / Immature, clumsy, / . . . Gullible, naïve, / Positively grubby, / . . . Plus, I believe, getting kind of chubby" and that "Mother understands, / Mother's here to help you." Gothel trumpets her love for Rapunzel while asserting, "I know you're not strong enough" to go out in the world, concluding, "You are not leaving this tower! Ever! Oh great, now I'm the bad guy." When Rapunzel sneaks

out of the tower, the handsome but untrustworthy Flynn Rider, himself damaged by his upbringing in an orphanage, diagnoses her problem as an "overprotective mother." All ends well when Rapunzel realizes that she is not Gothel's biological daughter—"I'm the lost princess. . . . Aren't I? Did I mumble, Mother? Or should I even call you that?"—and is reunited with her first parents, the king and queen who have been mourning her for eighteen years and who, unlike Gothel, are happy to welcome the reformed thief Flynn into the family.

Upon leaving the theater after seeing *Tangled,* I remarked to my friend that adoptive mothers have often received bad press in the US, adding that I saw the film as a dramatization of a classic adoption fantasy engaged in by countless children—most of them not adopted—and best summed up as "My real parents are royal." Although I didn't say as much at the time, my response was itself conditioned by Freud, who identifies this paradigm in his 1909 essay "Family Romances";[6] such was the power of Freudian discourse in the mid-twentieth century that it continues to influence our understanding of the family story even while we may have shifted our attention to newer issues. In Freud's account of this fantasy, the child imagines "the replacement of both parents or of the father alone by grander people," an "Emperor and Empress" who, as Freud sees it, are based upon the child's initial idealization of the parents in a hero-worship that has since been replaced by a more prosaic assessment (239–40). In *Tangled* as in many children's imaginations, the heroine has been stolen by inferior and illegitimate adoptive parents (here, an exploitative and smothering single mother) from perfect biological parents who are glamorous, rich, and eager to satisfy the lost daughter's every desire, so that the happy ending requires the child's reunion with her original family. To my surprise, my friend expressed a visceral rejection of this reading of the film, insisting that *Tangled* cannot possibly be about adoption because the child has been abducted rather than legitimately placed. Although for most of the narrative Rapunzel regards Mother Gothel as her mother, in my friend's reading they do not constitute a family, and interpreting them as one struck her as an assault on beliefs that she holds dear.

With this interchange in mind, I realized that *Tangled* affords an interesting opportunity to contemplate the figure of the adoptive mother in light of the shifting boundaries of adoption, which increasingly crosses lines of race and nation as well as lines of class. Jeana DelRosso notes the apparent ethnic difference between Disney's blonde Rapunzel and dark, curly-haired Gothel (523). Although Disney is here reversing conventional expectations about where ethnic Otherness is likely to be located, DelRosso's point nonetheless reminds us that an important difference between recent US adoption culture and its precursor in the 1930s to 1950s is not merely that people today are more likely to adopt internationally (transnational adoptions occurred in the earlier era as well, particularly after 1945 in response to the multitudes of war orphans and displaced children) but rather that we now feel a new kind of guilt about such adoptions. Our self-consciousness has an explicitly

political basis: we are sensitized today to see adoption not just as a matter of family psychology but also (or in some cases instead) as a matter of power relations involving class, race, and global inequality.

As Karen Dubinsky and DelRosso note, news reports over the past decades have publicized adoption scandals on multiple continents, scandals that have led to the shutting down of transnational adoptions in "over 40 per cent of the top forty sending nations over the last fifteen years" (Dubinsky 103; see also DelRosso 522). As a result, a narrative that equates transnational adoption in particular with kidnapping flourishes, and there is well-founded concern about the processes by which some children from certain countries became available for adoption. Did their birth parents intend to relinquish them, or are some of us unwittingly parenting stolen children? Adoption scholarship has increasingly turned to these morally compelling ethical issues, as for instance in recent work by Karen Balcom and Laura Briggs. It thus becomes reasonable to ask what, in contemporary American society, constitutes legitimate adoption—and whether we should acknowledge as a form of "family" such a thing as illegitimate adoption. I suggest that *Tangled,* and responses to it, may speak to anxiety that the love directed toward the parent by the child, which should by rights identify the "good" or "real" mother, may find an undeserving object. If we can see families forming as a consequence of acts or networks of exploitation, our attitude toward such families is likely to be ambivalent at best, an ambivalence that *Tangled* both dramatizes and prompts in its adult viewers.

In reviews of and online comments about *Tangled,* a pattern emerges similar to that established within my own viewing experience: adoptive parents are likely to feel attacked and to find rhetorical ways to distance themselves from Gothel (claiming, for instance, that "This film is talking about me, but what it's saying is wrong"), while writers in mainstream forums tend not to consider the film relevant to adoption at all. Reviewing *Tangled* in *The New York Times,* for instance, A. O. Scott remarks of Gothel, "A classic underminer, she has brainwashed Rapunzel into loving her, and her brutal selfishness is camouflaged in sweet-voiced expressions of solicitude. Really, though, she keeps the girl around only because of that golden hair." While Scott places Gothel in "The Disney pantheon . . . of evil stepmothers," he evidently does not consider that a family tie exists; since Gothel is unmarried, the term "stepmother" seems to connote not only that she belongs to a lengthy lineage of Disney villainesses who occupy this family role but also that she should not be considered a "real" mother. Similarly, although Kenneth Turan in *The Los Angeles Times* calls Gothel "A guilt-tripping, overprotective, super-manipulative parent from hell," for Turan this behavior reflects not genuine emotion but a way of "sugarcoating . . . tyranny" for someone who, despite her name, is best described not as a parent but as "a devious woman named Mother Gothel."[7]

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Online adoption forums and blogs by adoptive parents, however, foreground adoption as an issue in *Tangled.* For example, *Adoption.com* contains a lengthy thread by adoptive and foster parents concerned about the film's potentially damaging effect on their youngsters, many of whom have experienced considerable real-life trauma; similar threads exist on websites focused on international adoption, such as *Chinaadoptiontalk.blogspot.com* (Malinda). On *Adoptivefamiliescircle.com*, in a post titled "Discovering Unexpected Adoption-Related Themes in Disney Movies," a blogger named Meghan reports that *Tangled* "raises a *huge* red flag for me, even though my girls have yet to notice any parallels between this fiction and our own decision to adopt." The conflict that Meghan feels is apparent in the ambivalence with which she approaches *Tangled*'s generic classification: "I know this isn't an adoption movie. It's a story about a girl who is stolen and who fights to return to her roots. But there are similarities between the *Tangled* story and our family's adoption journey," she writes, concluding, "when a (fictional) woman steals a baby, it is an act of cruelty that in no way resembles a complicated but loving adoption. But I wonder if any of you have experiences with adoption in children's media. . . . If so, how have you handled them?" Among the responses is one by Jeff, an adoptive father who after watching *Tangled* "at first thought the same thing, the adoptive mom is the villain! But then I realized, no she's not (an adoptive parent, that is), she's a criminal!" Another response, signed "Jane A. Brown, MSW," suggests, "Since child trafficking is such a loaded, but pressing issue in the world of international adoption these days, some of these films/stories offer a segway [*sic*] into discussing that, that we can take advantage of, as adoptive parents. It gives children the opportunity to explore this overwhelmingly frightening reality, and develop ways to reply to peers who ask questions or suggest that that is why they may have become available to adopt."[8] By implication, these replies will tell the peers that they are wrong; Mother Gothel may look like an adoptive parent, but she isn't one.

But the beliefs that the category "adoptive parent" can't overlap with the category "criminal" or that baby-stealing "in no way resembles" adoption seem hard won in these posts, in which the writers describe reaching these positions after some thought. Other parents remark that their initial anxiety about being identified with Mother Gothel has been allayed by their children's contrary response. Blogger Carrie Goldman, self-described mother of three children evidently adopted domestically, reports,

> Late night, Katie and Annie Rose were playing "Tangled," and I seized the chance to explore Katie's thoughts, especially when she declared, "I am the Lost Princess."
>
> Hmmm. Does that make me the evil Mother Gothel? . . . I actually do look kind of like her—I have long brown curly hair and dark eyes. And Katie does kind of look like Rapunzel. . . .

> "Who am I?" I inquired.
>
> "Oh, you are the Queen," Katie said without missing a beat. "And Daddy is the King."
>
> "Well, who is Mother Gothel?" I persisted.
>
> Katie thought for a moment. "M?" she asked. M is her birth mother. . . . But then she looked uncertain. "No, because M is nice. Well, she could be a nice Mother Gothel." . . . At no point did Katie stop, re-evaluate, and say, "Hey, you know, M is actually my real mother, so she should be the Queen." Katie, unlike much of the world, does not equate birth mother with real mother.

Other adoptive mothers record that their children, too, see them as the legitimate parent rather than as the usurper. In responding to Meghan's blog post on *Tangled,* adoptive parent Stacy Clark notes that during the scene in which Rapunzel is reunited with her birth parents, "I was holding my breath to see if this would . . . leave [my daughter] feeling as if we 'took her away.' . . . But here's what happened. She reached one arm toward my husband, reached the other arm across me and out to her sister and pulled us all in together, making loving sounds, as she held us all close." Clark's post finds its counterpart in a number of similar comments from parents of adopted children presented as comfortable with their state.[9]

Adoptive parents are likely to consider such responses healthy, a vindication of the validity of their family situation. Of course, those opposed to adoption on principle may see these reactions from young adoptees as a symptom of what reviewer Scott terms "brainwash[ing]" in the case of the love that Mother Gothel elicits from Rapunzel or as self-delusion on the part of the adoptive parent. Tobias Hübinette, for instance, considers positive findings in studies of transnational adoptees a product of bias on the part of "researchers who are either adoptive parents themselves or affiliated to adoption agencies" ("Critique"); in light of his comments, one might wish to bear in mind the possibility that the adoptive parents blogging about their children's responses to *Tangled* may be inclined to overlook evidence suggesting that the children are less than ideally comfortable with their family circumstances.

Tangled, of course, doesn't present a legitimate adoption. But importantly, for some adoption activists there is no such thing, particularly where transnational adoption is concerned. In contrast to adoptive parent Dubinsky, who rejects the idea that "scandal and kidnap represent adoption as a whole" (103), Hübinette finds parallels between transnational adoption and "the Atlantic slave trade, . . . the dispatching of 12 million Indians and Chinese as indentured labor to the vast European empires between 1834 and 1941, and . . . the present day's massive trafficking of women and children for international marriage and sexual exploitation" ("From" 143), while Daniel Drennan ElAwar believes that adoption is "an economically and politically incentivized crime. It stems culturally and historically from the 'peculiar institution' of Anglo-Saxon indentured servitude and not

family creation." Although *Tangled* was produced within a dominant culture that presumes that most adoptions are in the best interests of the child (and this is the perspective from which adoptive parents' responses come), Gothel's abduction of the infant princess is clearly a criminal act, a deviation from the standard fairy-tale version in which the birth father—a commoner—agrees to surrender the baby as restitution for his thefts from the witch's garden.

Moreover, it may be—we don't have enough information to know for certain—that Gothel is not telling the truth as she sees it when she informs Rapunzel that she loves her deeply, that "everything I did was to protect you," and that she is hurt by Rapunzel's "complete and utter betrayal." Nevertheless, although Rapunzel displays a normal teenager's impatience with household rules and a normal readiness to find romantic satisfaction outside the family, it is also apparent that she feels love and obligation toward Gothel. Upon surreptitiously leaving her tower for the wider world that she has longed to see, for instance, Rapunzel expresses as much guilt as joy, saying both, "For the first time ever, I'm completely free!" and "Oh my gosh! This would kill [Mother]—I'm a horrible daughter . . . I'm a despicable human being." In other words, while we do not know whether Gothel is lying when she expresses maternal feelings toward Rapunzel, Rapunzel's feelings toward her seem genuinely those of a daughter—which surely makes them a family, however illegitimately or unfortunately.

Here we reach the aspect of *Tangled* that most disturbs viewers: Gothel is a criminal, a bad person who should not be considered a "real" adoptive mother, yet she elicits the same emotions from her stolen daughter that a conventional parent might. The responses that I have quoted from adoptive parents indicate that some young children adapt to the situation by identifying Gothel, a single parent who conveniently vanishes at story's end, with the *birth mother,* so that the happy ending that places the child with a stable and wealthy older married couple who should have had her all along functions as a successful adoption. "At last Rapunzel was home," notes Flynn in a voiceover, "and she finally had a real family." While Rapunzel's return to her "real" birth family and Flynn's return to his birth name suggest the primacy of the first family, the "finally had a real family" denouement functions as the happy ending as often in adoption tales (from *A Little Princess* and *Anne of Green Gables* to contemporary adoption picture books) as it does in reunion stories. Others are content to assert that a "real" mother, whether adoptive or biological, cannot also be a criminal, so Rapunzel's emotions must be spurious, the product of abuse from which she happily recovers. This downplaying of what has seemed genuine love for Gothel on Rapunzel's part is consistent with attitudes toward adoptive families displayed in reality-TV shows such as *Find My Family,* which present reunion with the birth family as magically satisfying and render the adoptive family invisible. That the royal couple and Mother Gothel share the sense of loss expressed in Gothel's incantatory song in the lines "Save what once

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was lost, / Bring back what once was mine," is apparently irrelevant; Gothel can have nothing in common with "real" mothers.

Writing in the *Wall Street Journal,* Lenore Skenazy pointed out in 2011 that in the United States, "baby abductions are exceedingly rare—last year CNN reported a single baby was abducted from a health-care facility." Nonetheless, in reporting on the case of Carlina White, who at the age of twenty-three solved her own kidnapping when she discovered that she had been taken from a hospital by Ann Pettway shortly after her birth, "CNN felt compelled to give its viewers tip after tip on how to make sure this does not happen to them." For Skenazy, the obsessive advice-giving is typical of a media devoted to "bringing us these awful anomalies and acting as if they're relevant to our daily lives." Beyond the obvious nightmare of having a child stolen, however, a glance at newspaper coverage of the Carlina White saga suggests additional reasons that the case might have played to parental anxieties. *New York Post* reporter Bob Fredericks quotes birth mother Joy White as saying, "I was on such a high when I first reunited with my daughter. . . . I was floating in air. I was so happy and that moment was so great." Yet subsequently, Carlina and Joy White again became "like . . . two strangers," in Joy White's phrase; Carlina reverted to the name under which she was raised and (according to other newspaper reports) expressed her willingness to testify in Pettway's defense, although as matters turned out, Pettway entered a plea of guilty and Carlina did not attend the sentencing hearing.[10] Another 2011 article describes Joy White as saying that she is "heartbroken, but I do understand that is her family. She was brought up by them. She's with that family. That's all she knows" (Gastaldo). From the Whites' standpoint, it seems, their original loss was magnified, understandably, by their realization that the crime had ultimately morphed into an illegitimate adoption. Unlike some viewers of the Disney film who stand outside the adoption community, Joy White recognized that criminality may not preclude the formation of a family—and that the resulting "tangled" emotions may impede happy endings.

Conclusion

Interestingly, some of the published work on *Tangled* reproduces the same doubts about what to call Gothel that we see in nonacademic discourse. For instance, Jena Stephens describes Rapunzel as "a young female who is captured and held captive in a tower by a woman pretending to be her mother, but who is actually using Rapunzel for the healing powers hidden within her astonishingly long blonde hair" (99); dismissing Gothel as a thief and a fraud, Stephens focuses on Rapunzel and her need to show her strength by rebelling against the usurper who seeks to oppress her. In contrast, DelRosso, a scholar who has also adopted internationally, directs her attention primarily toward Gothel. DelRosso's article "De-tangling

Motherhood: Adoption Narratives in Disney's *Tangled,*" to my knowledge the only published article to examine this film as an adoption narrative, argues (and I concur) that the film "establishes and perpetuates misogynistic ideas regarding the villainy and falsity of the adoptive mother. . . . following the biological imperative of pop culture, [it] erases the adoptive mother, eliminates her, until nothing remains but ashes on the ground" (530). Yet while the film clearly "plays into our [existing] cultural beliefs about the inadequacy and, in some cases, the malignancy of the adoptive mother," DelRosso concludes, it also picks up on current anxieties about the legitimacy of international and interracial adoptions, thus simultaneously "creat[ing] new fears about the role of adoption in children's lives" (530).

One point illustrated by considering *Tangled* alongside *Ordeal by Innocence* and "Mommy," then, is that the film shows how popular culture both preserves long-standing cultural anxieties, in this case about smother-love and adoptive mothers' selfishness, and pivots to new ones—here, that children reared outside their first families may have been stolen, a possibility that was not a significant part of adoption discourse in the 1930s and 1950s, or more sweepingly that adoption is a form of kidnapping or slavery, as some activists charge in a fashion that provides a new, politicized dimension and intensity to the long-standing "selfishness" idea. This position, too, did not have cultural traction when Counselman and Christie produced their narratives, but since today's adoptive parents are often consumers of any and all internet commentary on adoption, it may help to inform the defensiveness on display in some responses to *Tangled.* Sensitized to today's social-justice arguments about white middle-class exploitation of disenfranchised groups and to yesterday's psychologically based attacks on motherhood, the white middle-class adoptive parent must either concede or deny her guilt, but she cannot easily avoid the awareness that guilt is being imputed to her.

In keeping with this special issue's emphasis on exploring and foregrounding differences of perspective, I have sought here to illustrate how approaches to pop-culture adoption texts may be conditioned by the content and context of the primary sources. In turn, these approaches condition the potential findings of such an analysis, since both an emphasis on the psychology of adoptive maternity as understood by Freud and his popularizers and an emphasis on the personal responses and experiences recounted by the adoptive parents of young American children privilege a middle-class Western outlook. Yet as I have argued, this outlook has changed over time to identify new avenues through which to express cultural dismay not merely at adoption but also at practices and relationships extending well beyond adoption's boundaries. If Deutsch wrote and theorized at a time when the Victorian idealization of the middle-class mother was at war with a twentieth-century desire to defuse the mother's enormous cultural power, this conflict continues into our own day. Perhaps the inclination to hold adoptive parents, and particularly mothers, to account for social ills on a global scale by linking them to crimes from neurosis to bad parenting to theft to infringement

upon children's rights owes something to a belief that *good* mothers ought to be able to cure all ills.

Notes

I thank Margaret Homans and an anonymous outside reader for their valuable comments on this essay; I am also indebted to Elizabeth Talafuse for bringing "Mommy" to my attention and for her insights.

1. See Aidenbaum's roundup of popular-scientific discourse on motherhood at midcentury. (She focuses on the US, but Britain produced its own version.) The coining of the term "smother-love," which gave rise to "smother mother," has been credited to Sidonie Gruenberg, for many years the director of the US-based Child Study Association (Hulbert 113); the "refrigerator mother" concept was popularized by researchers including Bruno Bettelheim (Waltz 354).
2. Adoption historian Herman dates the spread of this idea to the 1960s, but I argue here that an examination of popular texts shows that it emerged earlier.
3. Simultaneously, children with mental, physical, or emotional abnormalities were typically considered unadoptable, and mothers (particularly unmarried mothers) who surrendered their offspring were seen as morally compromised and in some cases as feebleminded, problems that some feared might be passed along to their biological children. These stigmas augmented the pressure on social workers to place youngsters, always already presumed to be at risk, with irreproachable adoptive parents.
4. Brake is one of a number of sociologists to have discussed the relationship between British examples of rebellious youth, such as the Teddy boys of the 1950s, and contemporaneous American popular culture as expressed by icons such as James Dean and Elvis Presley (73). Christie uses the term "delinquent" six times in *Ordeal by Innocence*, five of them in relation to Jacko.
5. As should be clear from my summary of the novel, the narrative appears to endorse this contempt, at least in part; while it acknowledges that Micky in particular loved his birth mother and was happy in his original family life, it also suggests that his love was directed toward an unworthy object. In Christie's view, the emotional and moral instability of all the Argyle children, with the possible exception of Tina, may have genetic elements. My focus in this article, however, is not on "bad seed" adoptees but on the mothers who raise them, who in Christie's novel are clearly presented as problematic as well.
6. Kaplan discusses Freud's essay without reference to adoption studies (64–65); Novy discusses it from an adoption studies perspective (6–7, 130–31).
7. The name "Mother Gothel" is present in some traditional versions of the story, where it connotes a crone or a godmother.
8. Presumably this poster is the Jane A. Brown who is known for her "Adoption Playshops" and "AdoptShops," designed to encourage children to express their feelings about adoption and to "explore and integrate the adoption losses and gains" into their lives (*Books*). Brown herself does not appear to frame these "losses" as kidnapping, although they may be presented as events to be mourned alongside the celebration of "gains."

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9. I have not encountered responses to this film from children or from antiadoption adults.

10. In 2012, Pettway was sentenced to twelve years in federal prison for kidnapping. For examples of reportage on Carlina White's willingness to testify on her behalf, see "Baby Kidnapping Saga"; Golding; Johnston.

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