

“WUMBEN, WIMPUND, WOOMUD”: AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL CENSURE IN THE INTERNET AGE

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On June 6, 2020, the childhoods of an entire generation came to an abrupt close. At 5:35 p.m., J.K. Rowling posted a link on *Twitter* to “Opinion: Creating a More Equal Post-COVID-19 World for People Who Menstruate” with the caption: “People who menstruate.’ I’m sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” (@jk_rowling, “Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?”). What followed can best be described as a cataclysm—as *Variety* reported four days later, J.K. Rowling’s “tweets came under immediate criticism for in essence denying that transgender women are women, a stance that for many *Harry Potter* fans flies directly in the face of the books’ manifest lessons on inclusion and empathy” (Vary, “Warner Brothers Responds”). Numerous stars from the *Harry Potter* films—as well as Warner Brothers, the rightsholder to the franchise—similarly responded with tweets of their own in support of trans rights (Vary, “Warner Brothers Responds”). The damage, however, was done: for many lifelong *Harry Potter* followers, J.K. Rowling’s tweet read like a betrayal (Vary, “What J.K. Rowling’s Anti-Trans Views Could Mean”). Speaking to *Variety* in a different article published on the same day, Jackson Bird said, “for [Rowling] to decide to use her incredible platform to be very critical and hateful towards a particular group of people, it just seems an irresponsible use of the platform by one of the most influential people in the world” (qtd. in Vary, “What J.K. Rowling’s Anti-Trans Views Could Mean”).

As the author of *Sorted*, a memoir chronicling how *Harry Potter* helped him come out as trans, Bird provides what is, perhaps, one of the most poignant examples of the disappointment felt by many of J.K. Rowling’s fans. In his memoir, published less than a year before J.K. Rowling’s tweet, Bird wrote about his time working for the Harry Potter Alliance, a non-profit dedicated to uniting *Harry Potter* fans for various charitable causes (Bird, *Sorted* 119): “I had already come out to my coworkers and our entire volunteer staff over the course of the preceding months, and they were all perfectly accepting and happy for me. I wasn’t surprised in the least, because the [Harry Potter Alliance] had been working on issues of LGBTQ+ equality since they opened their doors in 2005” (195). At this time, the franchise was far from being associated with transphobia and calls for boycott as reported by numerous publications, including an article in *The Independent* about the possible financial consequences of a boycott of future *Harry Potter* franchise media (Chilton). The *Harry Potter* name was, instead, a symbol of inclusion and equality. Moreover, there seemed little doubt as to Rowling herself being fully behind the LGBTQ+ community: from Rowling’s 2007 reveal that

Dumbledore—a main character in the *Harry Potter* series—is gay, to her 2014 retweet of a meme captioned “if Harry Potter taught us anything, it’s that no-one should live in a closet” (qtd. in McNally). A year later, responding to criticism from the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), Rowling wrote, “I don’t care about WBC. I think it’s important that scared gay kids who aren’t out yet see hate speech challenged” (@jkrowling, “I don’t care about WBC”). Given Rowling’s support of gay rights, her disparagement of the trans community seems shockingly uncharacteristic—after all, how could someone who so actively challenges hate speech purposefully write something so hurtful?

Interestingly enough, J.K. Rowling’s “Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” was *not* the first time Rowling had published a transphobic tweet. Mere months after the publication of *Sorted* in 2019, Jackson Bird published an opinion piece in *The New York Times* entitled “‘Harry Potter’ Helped Me Come Out as Trans, But J.K. Rowling Disappointed Me.” This piece was a reaction to a tweet J.K. Rowling had posted in defense of Maya Forstater who had, in turn, “filed a lawsuit claiming [Forstater’s] employer, the Center for Global Development, discriminated against her because of beliefs she has often shared on Twitter—namely, that a person cannot change their sex, and her opposition to the proposed changes to the United Kingdom’s Gender Recognition Act that would allow people to legally change their gender” (Bird, “‘Harry Potter’ Helped Me Come Out”). At a glance, Rowling’s “Forstater” tweet seems at least as transphobic as the “Wumben” tweet if not more so: “Dress however you please. Call yourself whatever you like. Sleep with any consenting adult who’ll have you. Live your best life in peace and security. But force women out of their jobs for stating that sex is real? #IStandWithMaya #ThisIsNotADrill” (@jk_rowling, “Dress however you please”). Unlike the “Wumben” tweet which, in its levity, downplays the significance of its subject matter, the “Forstater” tweet explicitly makes the typical anti-trans comment that “sex is real” (@jk_rowling, “Dress however you please”). Why, then, did the “Wumben” tweet cause a tidal wave of public disapproval when the “Forstater” tweet—in spite of being discussed by major publications such as *The New York Times*—did not firmly label Rowling as a transphobe?

There are many possible explanations for the “Wumben” tweet breaking the proverbial camel’s back, ranging from COVID-weariness (by the time of Rowling’s tweet, the world had been quarantined for several months) to Rowling’s transphobia having reached a certain “critical mass.” It is difficult to find one true answer to the “why Wumben?” question; more likely than not, a variety of factors came into play. One such factor is, however, easy to overlook because it lies in the nature of the tweet itself: it is the very levity which makes the “Wumben” tweet seem tamer than, in fact, angered and disappointed Rowling’s fans. First and foremost, the inventive wording—“Wumben,” “Wimpund,” “Woomud”—is immediately reminiscent of *Harry Potter* with its “wrackspurt” (Rowling, *Half-Blood Prince* 140), and “Wingardium Leviosa” (Rowling, *Sorcerer’s Stone* 124). By using whimsical language so similar to that of *Harry Potter*, Rowling effectively conflates the fantasy world of her creation with a

transphobic reality. If a more grounded tweet—such as Rowling’s support of Forstater—would allow a reader to mentally separate Rowling from her work, the “Wumben” tweet immediately suggests that transphobia can exist within the magic of the Potterverse. The same language that caused an entire generation to fall in love with Rowling’s fantastical creations had, in under 140 characters, become weaponized against the trans community.

For fans who had long considered Rowling’s imaginative world a place of safety and acceptance, the “Wumben” tweet proved disillusioning: a fact remarked upon by, among others, Mallory Yu, an associate producer for NPR’s *All Things Considered*. In an NPR piece several days after the tweet, Yu remarks, “you’ll excuse me if it hurts personally, maybe a little too personally, that Rowling so casually mocks language that seeks to include me and other trans people.” Yu, who “doesn’t categorize neatly as man or woman,” analyzes Rowling’s dismissal of the phrase “people who menstruate” and makes the point that they are among those who are “quite literally, people who menstruate” (Yu). Yet, Rowling does not allow for this possibility. She suggests that cisgender women are a magical breed and a breed for whom the very language is endangered, as evidenced by Rowling’s choice of the phrase “used to be a word for those people?” (@jk_rowling, “Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud”). As a result, Rowling sets up an “us vs. them”—a cisgender versus transgender—dichotomy that the reader becomes drawn into against their will. It is difficult to imagine Rowling would post a tweet with the express intention of alienating her fan base. Therefore, in view of the ease with which Rowling assumes a sympathetic audience, as well as what Yu notes as the lightness with which she “casually mocks” an issue that is—without exaggeration—life-or-death for trans individuals, another significant aspect of the “Wumben” tweet must be considered: the humor.

Unlike Rowling’s “Forstater” tweet, which is a straightforward (albeit, transphobic) statement, the words “Wumben,” “Wimpund,” and “Woomud” offer another dimension to Rowling’s speech. As it happens, beyond their similarity to the language of *Harry Potter*, they—as well as the entirety of Rowling’s tweet—can be interpreted as a joke. Much has been written about Rowling’s ability to masterfully weave together the darkest of themes with playfulness. As a passage from one of the many literary analyses of *Harry Potter* suggests, “Just as [*Harry Potter*] is both a children’s and an adult’s series, it is also both solemn and quite funny. The humor, too, is a part of the educational process within the book ... serving both an empathetic and a cathartic function” (Pharr 65). Rowling appears to transfer her signature style onto the “Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?” tweet. The terms themselves can be viewed as playful, comical distortions of the word “women.” Similarly, the entire tweet plays on the irony of needing to search for a self-evident answer to an obvious question—since, in Rowling’s view, “people who menstruate” *are* women, the very act of posing the question is unnecessary to the point of being absurd. Naturally, the comical merits of the tweet are questionable (and, judging by the response, many readers did not

appreciate Rowling's "humor"), yet the structure of the tweet suggests a set-up ("People who menstruate") and a punchline ("Wumben," "Wimpund," "Woomud"). Although this dissection of Rowling's tweet as a joke might seem unimportant and rather self-explanatory, it raises questions that examine the very nature of free speech. Could the "humorous" or, to use Yu's phrase once again, "casually mocking" language of the "Wumben" tweet explain why many of Rowling's fans saw it impossible to enter into a conversation with Rowling as they had during Rowling's prior transphobic remarks? Could it be possible that the tweet sparked public backlash specifically because jokes seem to be governed by a different set of rules than regular, non-humorous speech?

In order to analyze Rowling's tweets in the context of humor, it will be helpful to provide a terminology for the discussion. In her essay "Just Joking! The Ethics of Humour," humor philosopher Robin Tapley seeks out to define the distinctions between "morally objectionable" and "merely offensive" jokes. Tapley suggests that one of the key factors in distinguishing between the two categories is the power relationship—the "social disparity"—between the joke's teller and the subject of the joke as well as the level of "social harm" that is brought on or implied by the telling of said joke. Harm, in Tapley's view, is more a global concept rather than an individual one; for example, a joke playing on years of stereotypes of a marginalized community would constitute harm, while ridiculing a balding co-worker might just be insensitive (192). A joke that crosses the threshold into morally objectionable territory could then, according to Tapley, be subject to "social censure"—"the strongest most effective kind of disapprobation that can radiate from society at large ... the highest level of disapprobation and behaviour regulation short of legal intervention" (180). First published in 2005, when social media was still in its nascent stages, much of Tapley's essay is doubly applicable to 2021's era of Twitter, partisanship, and "fake news." With that, it only seems natural to examine Rowling's online behavior through the lens of Tapley's definitions with the hopes of providing a deeper understanding of the disappointment and anger surrounding the "Wumben" situation.

As it happens, the "Wumben" tweet offers a nigh-perfect case study for Tapley's work. In Tapley's words, a "morally objectionable joke" occurs when "*a person in a dominant social position, publicly and intentionally targets some person or group who is in a subordinate social position in a way that degrades or dehumanizes that person or group*" (180, emphasis original). The similarities between Tapley's definition of what constitutes a "morally objectionable" joke and Rowling's writing are difficult to ignore. As one of the world's most celebrated, beloved, and popular writers, J.K. Rowling is a person in a dominant social position who publicly (on Twitter) and intentionally targeted trans individuals (a group in a subordinate social position) in a way that degraded and dehumanized them. It is intentional because, subject matter aside, the "Wumben" tweet was well-written. It is dehumanizing because, by claiming that only women menstruate, Rowling mocked any acknowledgement that trans, nonbinary, and

genderqueer individuals can have basic human functions (which, by its very definition, is an example of dehumanization). In other words, Rowling’s “Wumben” tweet fit all the criteria necessary to be deemed morally objectionable; as a consequence, just as Tapley’s writing had predicted, Rowling was subject to social censure—the proverbial “cancellation” (Rowling, “J.K. Rowling Writes”). However, although the social censure against Rowling following the “Wumben” tweet may have been an understandable response to a morally objectionable joke, the question remains as to why the “Wumben” tweet caused more uproar than the “Forstater” tweet. If anything, Tapley suggests:

[T]he [speech problem] to be overcome in defining morally objectionable jokes, concerns the idea that because we are ‘just joking’ we can say anything whatsoever with moral immunity. Underlying this notion is the idea of an absolute or ideal sort of free speech protection. That is, even if we disapprove of a joke or any kind of speech, we can do nothing about it since it is ‘protected speech’. (181)

While Tapley’s essay proceeds to examine the “speech problem” in terms of “social disparity” and “social harm,” the assumption that a joke can give a speaker *more* license to test boundaries is taken for granted. Yet, in the case of Rowling’s tweets, it was the joke—the making light of a serious issue—that upset fans more than the explicit, serious “Forstater” tweet.

One possible explanation to the “Wumben” tweet’s negative effect lies with, as briefly mentioned, Rowling’s assumption of a sympathetic audience. In fact, Tapley’s examination of the nature of jokes suggests a theory (initially proposed by philosophers and researchers Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks) that “*beliefs* are fundamental to humor . . . it is not just the having of a belief that is necessary to humor, but the contention that the belief is true” (Tapley 174-5, emphasis original). This belief need not even be held by a joke’s audience, as Tapley writes: “While the beliefs couched in the jokes have to be true, they can be true in an imaginary sense. That is, the jokes can be entertained as true, without actually being believed” (175). However, as Tapley continues,

Whether one personally holds a belief to be true is really not the point . . . a joke has to have content that is true in a social sense—some people in the society are known to have this belief, or the belief can be imagined to be true—rather than a personal sense, in order to be funny. (175-6)

By expecting support for a morally objectionable joke, the speaker, in a sense, demands complicity from the audience; by acknowledging the joke, the audience must also—if only for the duration of the joke—adopt a belief that would allow them to see its

humor. In the case of the “Wumben” tweet, J.K. Rowling not only made an anti-trans joke, but she expected her audience to share the beliefs required for the joke to land. This expectation was, perhaps, one of the most painful aspects of the “Wumben” tweet: not only did Rowling hold transphobic views, but she used her considerable platform to assume her followers hold the same opinions—or, at the very least, are open to considering them as true. While the “Forstater” tweet was revealing of Rowling’s personal opinions, it never implied or assumed the audience’s support; it was one person’s view over that of a community. The “Wumben” tweet, on the other hand, suggested that Rowling’s followers and *Harry Potter* fans in general – many of whom belong to the LGBTQ+ community or, at the very least, support LGBTQ+ rights – must be able to partake, to believe in Rowling’s transphobic reality. This expectation of active engagement ultimately proved an insult that many of Rowling’s fans were not willing to accept.

On June 10, 2020, four days after the “Wumben” tweet, Rowling released a lengthy essay defending her position. Rather than issuing an apology, Rowling doubled down on her transphobic views—suggesting that her tweets were, in fact, in defense of women’s rights (Rowling, “J.K. Rowling Writes”). Among Rowling’s point-by-point series of justifications for her anti-trans position (which author and trans activist Jennifer Finney Boylan referred to as a “greatest-hits list of false statements and groundless fears” in an opinion piece in *The New York Times*), two points in particular are worthy of further discussion. First, Rowling suggests that she has become the target of internet abuse for being a “Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist [TERF]” (Rowling, “J.K. Rowling Writes”)—a term which Rowling seems to equate with misogyny: “people swarmed back into my timeline, assuming a right to police my speech, accuse me of hatred, call me misogynistic slurs and, above all—as every woman involved in this debate will know—TERF” (Rowling, “J.K. Rowling Writes”). A number of writers have questioned whether the term is offensive—including research suggesting that it is often specifically those accused of trans-exclusionary feminism who dislike the term, preferring to be called “gender critical” instead (Pearce et al. 681). Perhaps the most succinct response to Rowling comes from the famed gender philosopher Judith Butler: “I am not aware that TERF is used as a slur. I wonder what name self-declared feminists who wish to exclude trans women from women's spaces would be called?”

However, there was another title Rowling claimed for herself in that essay: “as a much-banned author, I’m interested in freedom of speech and have publicly defended it, even unto Donald Trump” (Rowling, “J.K. Rowling Writes”). A month after Rowling’s essay, *Harper’s Magazine* published “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate,” an open letter defending free speech with multiple prominent authors, thinkers, and artists—including Rowling—as its signatories. The open letter echoes the sentiments in Rowling’s essay, stating “While we have come to expect [the constriction of the free exchange of information and ideas] on the radical right, censoriousness is also spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for

public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty” (Williams). Tapley suggests that “to suppose ... that ‘free speech’ is absolute ... is naïve. Free speech is not an indiscriminate blanket protection against absolutely anything” (181). Furthermore, the open letter states, as if in response, “The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation” (Williams). Judging from those very words she endorsed with her signature, Rowling recognizes the harm the restriction of speech has on those who lack power, but doesn’t seem to realize her “casually mocking” tweet has the same chilling effect. Perhaps, others did come to realize that. Jennifer Finney Boylan had also initially signed the *Harper’s* open letter; however, upon seeing Rowling’s name on it, Boylan withdrew her signature.

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