

Book 4, Ep. 5 | Trans Studies with Taylor Allgeier-Follett

SPEAKERS

Taylor Allgeier-Follett, Marcelle Kosman, Hannah McGregor

(Witch, Please Theme Music plays) (Dance of the Priestesses by Victor Herbert Orchestra)

Marcelle Kosman 00:10

Hello and welcome to Witch please a fortnightly podcast about the Harry Potter world. I'm Marcelle Kosman.

Hannah McGregor 00:16

And I'm Hannah McGregor. And this will come as a shock to everyone, including us. But we have another guest today.

Marcelle Kosman 00:24

Oh my god, another guest today, we are so lucky. Today's guest is Taylor Allgeier Follett, pronouns they/them. Taylor is a PhD candidate at University College Dublin, where their thesis is on women and their relationship to family in contemporary Irish novels. They also work with queer and trans representation, theory and popular culture, and taught a class on Harry Potter as a student at UC Berkeley, which is amazing. **(Soundbite of crowd cheering)** Taylor lives in Dublin with their cat, dog, partner, and a ridiculous number of books.

Hannah McGregor 01:04

(laughs) These all really just speak to your expertise for the topic of today's episode. But why don't we start off by finding out a bit more about you in the sorting chat? So Taylor, you've taught a class about Harry Potter, which does suggest that you know Harry Potter fairly well.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 01:25

Yeah, it was actually kind of the first book I remember getting, which does date me in terms of how young I am. And yeah, I have actually read every book in the Harry Potter series 42 times.

Hannah McGregor 01:40

Have you counted? Do you keep track?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 01:43

I have. I used to keep track with tally marks in my childhood desk. And then I transferred it to my phone and I was going for 50 and then I stopped very abruptly about last year. And so my relationship to the Harry Potter series is a breakup with the longest relationship of my life. And really regretting some of my wedding choices for instance, like walking down the aisle to leaving Hogwarts. Wish I'd just done Love Story. Um, yeah, so that's what it's been. It's been a very, very good and close and loving thing for me for a really long time. And now it's not.

Marcelle Kosman 02:19

You know, Taylor, I think that probably like 99% of our listeners are in a very similar boat as you and so they're probably finding this really reassuring, they're probably like, oh my god, I also read it like 45 times. And yeah.

Hannah McGregor 02:36

yYeah, I think it's a boat that a lot of us are in, though I certainly have not read the books 42 times, my goodness. But I think a question a lot of us are grappling with this year is so what is our relationship to this fandom now? Do you still engage with ideas of being in a particular house or love for a particular character?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 02:58

Yeah, so I would say I engage kind of on the fanfiction level in terms of like reading and consuming commenting on all that, especially from queer and trans creators. I really like kind of talking to other queer and trans friends who do like Harry Potter

just to unpack that in a kind of similar way. I was a gryffindor, I would still say that I'm a gryffindor. I will do anything if you dare me to. It's very bad. **(Marcelle laughs)** But I wouldn't talk about it too much anymore. You know, I don't wear my Weasley sweater anymore. And my favorite character would probably be Lupin. **(Soundbite of wolf howling)** Every probably four months I have a period where I just need to lay down and think about things like Lupin and also Sirius and I just can't be disturbed during that time.

Hannah McGregor 03:47

(laughs) Taylor is having their alone time.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 03:49

Oh, there's a playlist. Yeah, it gets real emotional. Actually, I have a fic reading group with two of my friends. We send each other links to largely wolf star fanfictions and read them together.

Marcelle Kosman 04:02

For folks who are maybe less into the fandom, can you tell us what wolf star is?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 04:07

It's the romantic relationship between Sirius and Remus. So a lot of people like that a lot. I would consider myself one of them. You know, love a good queer coding.

Hannah McGregor 04:21

Oh, what a good segue.

(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)

As we all know, the key to learning is repetition. So let's get started with some good old fashioned revision.

Marcelle Kosman 04:44

And where we probably want to start things off is a quick refresh of our conversation about queer theory. Linking it to feminist

theory, we talked about how queer theory reminds us of the need for fundamentally intersectional readings, particularly when we think about how gender and sexuality are not stable identities, but rather complex forms of relationality. That, of course, also always intersects with race and class.

Hannah McGregor 05:13

And we focused in in our queer theory episode on the idea of compulsory heterosexuality, also known as hetero normativity, and how it makes queer relationships institutionally illegible in ways that actively endanger queer people. We talked about how assumed heterosexuality is what makes the characters in the Harry Potter books legible as heroes, something we saw again in the way heterosexuality structures the tasks in this book, right? We talked about how they're sort of all based on this really normative heterosexual model of coming of age. And we talked about how many villains in Harry Potter are queer coded in some way, focusing in particularly on the feminization of Lockhart as a sign of there being something not quite right, so to speak, or duplicitous about him.

Marcelle Kosman 06:07

And queer coding as a means of establishing villains as duplicitous is going to be pretty central to today's conversation as we dip into the field of transgender studies, and talk about how we might read some characters, ahem, Rita Skeeter (***Soundbite of crickets chirping***), in particular, as trans coded, and transphobic. But we thought to get started, we might want to look at some of the ways that gender is identified and discussed in the Goblet of Fire.

Hannah McGregor 06:41

I took a sort of first run, I mean, at this point, I think, a fifth run, but I went through the book, and was like, alright, what does Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire have to say about gender, If anything? And it turns out that it has, like, a lot to say about

gender, and that almost everything it has to say about gender is like, deeply essentialized. And, like, normalized, and that for me, the first moment that stood out is when the Weasleys and Harry and Hermione all arrive at the Quidditch World Cup. And there is one tent for the boys and one tent for the girls. And I was like, not a tent for the adults that attend for the children who are all the same age and surely could have a slumber party. Nope. That is not how tents work.

Marcelle Kosman 07:42

(laughs) No, it's not a Thanksgiving dinner table. Hannah, you need constant surveillance when you're separating people.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 07:48

Yeah, keeping in mind, of course, that the girls in question are 13 and 14, and that one of them is the youngest sister of like six of the boys. It's just, it doesn't make sense for why even in the most essentialist of readings, why that would be needed in any way?

Hannah McGregor 08:05

Absolutely. It doesn't make logistical sense. It doesn't make familial sense, like it's just, it's wild. But then that soupcon of gender binary enforcement gets driven home much more powerfully. Only a few pages later, when we get the comic relief of a wizard who is wearing a long flowery night gown, which Hermione apparently finds hilarious.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 08:30

I will say that "I like a healthy breeze around my privates, thanks" line, I think I would also have a fit of the giggles that moment regardless of who was talking, but it is very clearly structured in a society where they are all wearing robes, which are basically dresses, that as soon as you take it outside of the context of the dominant society of wizards and put it inside the context of Muggles. Now this exact style of clothing is no longer okay.

Hannah McGregor 08:56

Well, and that happens again later on when Ron gets the dress robes and tells Mrs Weasley that he thinks that she's given him Ginny's new dress, which, as you say, Taylor is like, okay, they're all wearing robes. Robes are just dresses, like the attempt to gender this clothing feels heavy handed. And I think we could do a reading here that's like, Oh, what an interesting commentary on the arbitrariness of the gendered nature of clothing. Like that it's actually really highlighting that what we call women's clothes and what we call men's clothes are completely arbitrary categories because robes are just robes, and Ron's alarm at wearing a robe with some lace on it just seems so silly.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 09:48

To the point where he would prefer to wear something that looks ragged that he then has like, tattering on the edges that have something with a bit of lace.

Hannah McGregor 09:58

The clothing I think we could read in the same way that we've been reading these texts as being full of interesting queer slippages, I find it a little harder to locate an interesting queer slippage in the veelas, which is the other place at the Quidditch World Cup, where you see heteronormativity really driven home. And that is that, like, the veelas seem to affect men and not women?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 10:28

Wait, you haven't heard only men like women. It's this whole new thing.

Hannah McGregor 10:32

I'm so confused, because I did think that I was attracted to women, but I guess.

Marcelle Kosman 10:37

I think it's just a phase.

Hannah McGregor 10:38

Oh, yeah, that makes sense. The ripe old age of 37 I'm still just going through a phase. But yeah, I had to really sort of comb through that part of the book because it doesn't say overtly all of the women were fine. It's just that you see Ron attempt to hurl himself off the stadium seating and Hermione being, according to Harry, like, surprisingly unbothered.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 11:08

Why is it surprising?

Hannah McGregor 11:09

(laughs) Yeah, great question. Great question, Taylor.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 11:14

I just want to eyebrow-raise it all of that. Yeah. I mean, the Veelas, too, are such a rich subject of discussion in many, many ways. But I think specifically the way that they are women, they're exclusively women, and they become monsters when they're upset. What???

Hannah McGregor 11:32

Yeah, we're gonna do a whole episode on monstrous women, because this book is packed full of women being monsters and monsters being women. But this thinking about the way that both heteronormativity and also just the patriarchy structures this book really came through to me in this rereading of the weighing of the wands scene, which is really just an extended dick joke. I mean, I know we made this point in the original run of this podcast, but the scene where like, Cedric is like my wand is super polished and Harry is like my wand is covered in dirty fingerprints, and starts to like, polish it surreptitiously with his robe, and then Fleur gives him this, like disgusted look, like it is just like he is a little boy in a competition with older men.

And like his wand is not up to snuff. And that whole scene is like very, very wands are dicks, but because of the deep gender

normativity of this text, it once again has like this problem dealing with Fleur. That's like, what do we do with the lady when the wands are dicks? And that's my impression of this book. *(laughs)*

Marcelle Kosman 12:50

(laughs) What do we do with the lady?

Hannah McGregor 12:52

What do we do with the lady? And so what we get, you know, she goes first so that she can sort of be put aside. We established that her power comes from the fact that she is a Veela and that her grandmother's Veela hair is in her wand.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 13:09

So it's biological power, not an innate ability.

Hannah McGregor 13:12

Biological inherited power that is directly linked to her innate monstrosity rather than her ability to conquer or control a monster. Right?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 13:22

And her innate femininity.

Hannah McGregor 13:23

Yes, and her innate femininity, and it's established that her magic is more chaotic than what's his face? Wand boy.

Marcelle Kosman 13:32

Olivander.

Hannah McGregor 13:33

Thank you Marcelle.

Marcelle Kosman 13:34

Mr. Wandy Wand.

Hannah McGregor 13:36

Mr. Wandy Wand, AKA Ollivander is like oh, I don't like using Veela hairs because the magic is too unpredictable. And then what does that fucker do when he's like proving that her wand works? Just make some goddamn metaphorical vaginas with it. By which I mean flowers, a bunch of flowers.

Marcelle Kosman 13:53

I never thought about that. That's so true. He makes like a Georgia O'Keeffe painting. *(laughs)*

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 14:06

(laughs) He just makes a Georgia O'Keeffe painting with her wand. *(Soundbite of chimes)*

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 14:06

And they're orchids which are like one of the most yonic of flowers.

Hannah McGregor 14:10

Yeah, it's orchideous, right? Basically what happens is that they start off by being like, this is the lady wand. You can tell because look, a vagina comes out of it, anyway, on to the dick jokes.

Marcelle Kosman 14:25

Oh, no...

Hannah McGregor 14:26

Oh, no, indeed.

Marcelle Kosman 14:29

Well, now that we're talking about magic spells and metaphorical genitalia, I think it might be time for us to move on to transfiguration class so that we can actually understand what it is that we're talking about.

(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)

The only thing better than meeting someone new is learning something new from them. So let's get ready to do just that in transfiguration class!

Hannah McGregor 15:00

Taylor, you are taking the lead in the section because you are the expert. But could we start off by maybe getting a little bit of a prehistory of trans studies? Maybe that sort of links it to queer theory and where we ended with that?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 15:17

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, to put together a history of trans studies is actually much harder than I thought it possibly could be when I sat down to do it, because it is a very nebulous kind of field. It's very much in flux, and it's very much purposefully in flux. So trans studies emerged out of or as a dark twin, as Susan Stryker called it to queer studies and builds on some gender studies basis. So Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, which you've talked about before, provided some vocabulary Judith Butler argues that gender is a repeated performance, which obviously matters when you begin investigating the components and pitfalls of assigned gender, and why that performance is even happening.

In 1991, Sandy Stone published *The Post Transsexual Manifesto*, where she defined transsexual and its problems as those whose potential for productive disruption of structured sexualities and spectrum of desire has yet to be explored. Problem in this case being a positive thing.

Hannah McGregor 16:13

Alright, so the idea that Sandy Stone is working with here is that there is a positive disruption or positive problem, like a generative problem around the idea of the transsexual.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 16:26

I mean, I think that there is very much, there are people who would agree and would disagree with like, whether it even wants

to be seen as positive. In trans studies, it's certainly positive. It's certainly productive. But it's positive in that it's against society, and disruptive in that way. So you know, there's also there there's a very strong sect of queer theory and trans theory, which would be queer negativity. So in that case, a problem is negative and negative is good. It's all it gets very, it gets very murky once you start getting in the weeds of it all.

Marcelle Kosman 17:02

It sounds very philosophical.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 17:04

It is.

Hannah McGregor 17:05

We talked about queer negativity a little bit in the original run around the tension between queer negativity and heterosexual reproductive futurity. So it's this idea that like-

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 17:18

Lee Edelman-

Hannah McGregor 17:19

Yeah, Lee Edelman's work, which is basically like heterosexuality is associated with reproduction, which capitalism loves because it's like, the social and biological reproduction of workers for the future. And queerness has this sort of refusal of reproduction. And this refusal of productivity, which has a sort of insidious negativity to it, this idea of like, saying no, and refusing to reproduce sort of pushes back against the compulsion of futurity.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 17:48

That's definitely like an important strand. But another important strand there is like queer survival and queer positivity would be another way to say it. So there's a prominent theorist who does queer theory and trans theory, I believe, Jose Esteban Munoz and and he writes directly against Edelman, in several points in his

career with queer futurity. So he has a book called *Cruising Utopia* that talks about queer futurity instead of queer negativity. So it's all very, there's a small sect of a lot of back and forth. There's a very large, very vibrant community working off of that.

Hannah McGregor 18:26

So that gives us beautifully sort of, at least an example of what the disciplinary conversations look like sort of within trans studies, right, like negativity versus positivity, refusing futurity versus embracing futurity.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 18:41

Honestly, that could just be one, what, like a single especial issue of transgender studies quarterly, which is kind of the central periodical in the field. It's where a lot of people turn to. It was started in 2014. And so it's hard. One of the reasons it's hard to define trans studies is because of the multitude of investments that trans studies has, so there's this medical side of it that pushes for depathologizing trans mentalities and trans bodies, and obviously, that part also looks into the constructiveness of trans bodies.

And that's pretty far from trans theory that is purely theoretical. However, they overlap in cases such as Susan Stryker's *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*, above the village of **Shemini**, performing transgender rage, where she specifically talks about how the trans body is comparable to Frankenstein's monster because it is built out of science, and that's a foundational text there. So you just see a lot of different directions that trans theory can go and trans studies can go. So one of the reasons it's so interdisciplinary is that the basic premise of trans studies is to view trans people and trans theory as subjects rather than objects.

Hannah McGregor 19:52

So shifting away from like, as you said, the pathologizing approach of like, cis people studying trans people, and to instead be like, what is trans knowledge? What is trans theory? What are trans poetics?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 20:08

Exactly. One of the important things in trans understanding and trans lives is that there's no right or wrong way to be trans. And in that regard, that means there is no right or wrong way for trans theory to apply to trans lives.

Hannah McGregor 20:23

Yeah, absolutely. And so that makes sense that it would create a field that is sort of inherently less interested in, like this is what counts as trans studies. And this doesn't.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 20:33

Exactly, exactly, yeah, so some would say that trans studies is actually specifically out of queer theory, that queer studies is its own field, and that they should be separated to focus on the trans instead of focusing on the sexuality elements of it. And I, you know, I don't know where I personally stand on that, others would, of course, see them as inherently intertwined. So it really what matters in there really just depends on the work and the contexts and the particular theorists investment.

Hannah McGregor 21:05

So trans studies, in this sense, lines up with a lot of what's happening with public conversations about transness, which is to say that there have always been trans people, there has always been trans community, there have always been these conversations. But in academia, much as in the media, there's a sort of heightened visibility happening right now. And that comes with some pluses, right, like hires and journals and conferences, and, you know, new, exciting scholarly conversations building and then it also comes with some downsides. And I think the example

that comes to mind for me most often is just watching what happens to Grace Lavery on Twitter every time she says literally anything.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 21:53

Yeah. So I went to Berkeley for my undergrad and I actually took the class with Grace Lavery. *(Hannah gasps in excitement)* I don't know she would remember me. It was a big class. It was awesome.

Hannah McGregor 22:02

I'm a big fan. Can we give a tiny little, who Grace Lavery is?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 22:07

Yes, absolutely. So Grace Lavery is Victorianist. When I talk about her to my friends here, I say that she and her husband are basically trans royalty. They're both amazing. They're both incredibly vibrant voices for support of young trans people. And Grace Lavery is a professor at Berkeley. She works primarily or has worked primarily with Victorian anesthetics. And she's, I don't want to say outspoken because I don't think that she is outspoken, but she is a prominent voice in discussing trans issues. So she recently wrote an article on George Eliot, it was a trans reading of George Eliot, drawing on Psychoanalytic criticism. And for people unfamiliar with Psychoanalytic criticism. It's not something you casually read, it's not something you like to just apply to things for fun. *(Hannah laughs)*

Hannah McGregor 22:53

I mean, I have a whole PhD in literature and I would never casually read any Psychoanalytic criticism. It baffles me.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 23:02

Yeah. So it's just not, you know, if you're reading a psychoanalytic critical article, consider if you understand what the psychoanalytic critics are saying first, and on Twitter, people don't necessarily understand that. So what they've done is they'll screenshot these

incredibly in depth arguments, take them completely out of context and use it as evidence for the inherent evilness of trans people. Not to mention that she has been accused of grooming, which was just ridiculous. And as I said, I was one of her students. I knew several people who worked with her through several semesters, and she's just a wonderful supportive professional voice. So it's just really horrifying, seeing the way that being a trans theorist, whether you are working in trans theory, or whether you are just a trans person gets all of these transphobic attacks for anything.

Hannah McGregor 23:49

That was a conversation I followed very closely. She was specifically accused of grooming for arguing on Twitter, that during the pandemic, people who teach queer theory needed to be conscientious about the safety of their students, because a lot of students had had to go home because of the pandemic, and would not necessarily be safe, like studying queer theory at home. And so like, she was basically just saying, hey, professors think about this in very practical ways. Like what are you making your students print out? What books are you making your students buy, you have to be conscious of the fact that they're in their homes, not on campus right now. And that when it comes to queer theory, in particular, that can be a real risk, and she was accused of grooming based on that.

Marcelle Kosman 24:38

I don't want to make too much of a leap here. But it sounds like the way that the two of you are discussing Grace Lavery as a sort of example of how trans public figures are villainized might be a really useful jumping off point to talk about trans coding and queer coding, because I think what we're eventually going to get into is talking about Rita Skeeter. So maybe we should take this opportunity to talk a little bit more about what it means to trans code, or what trans coding is, what queer code is.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 25:14

Yeah, absolutely. Trans coding and queer coding are both categories, which are kind of, I keep saying this, but difficult to talk about specifically, because of the fine line here, between coding and stereotyping. Trans coding is especially tricky, because what's the difference between knowingly coding someone is trans? And why wouldn't you just say they're trans and exposing someone as trans for the readers to clock?

Hannah McGregor 25:37

Okay, so can you unpack that for me a little bit, the difference between knowingly coding someone as trans versus exposing? What is coding versus exposing here?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 25:49

So what I would call good faith coding, because there's obviously trans coding that is transphobic in nature, is when you're going to set someone or something up in relation to society, where there will be trans resonances between the thematic material, the symbolic material, or the way the structure of the story works overall. Whereas if you're exposing someone, it's when you're using harmful stereotypes, such as overly man-sih features, for instance, just to pick a random example. And inviting the readers to join in and I joke of using trans stereotypes to notice something's off about someone. So there's a fear, you know, there's a fear for a lot of trans women, especially if they're, for instance, out on the subway or out in the world that they will be clocked and physically attacked. So it's a very real, lived problem and fear. And so encouraging it in literature isn't necessarily a great thing.

Hannah McGregor 26:50

Yeah, yeah. So the difference between building trans themes into a text versus the widespread practice in Hollywood of casting, cis men to play trans women, which reproduces a belief that trans women are secretly really cis men.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 27:13

Exactly. So a good example of this kind of positive building is the matrix where Lilly Wachowski herself, a trans woman has explicitly stated that she and her sister intended it as a trans allegory, expressing the desire for transformation, but coming from a closeted point of view.

Hannah McGregor 27:30

Yeah, yeah. Which is a great pleasure for many reasons, including that it really pisses off a lot of fuckboys on the internet.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 27:37

Oh, yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 27:39

(laughs) So we're going to talk about Rita Skeeter, in relation to transcoding in bad faith. But I'm wondering among the fandom, among readers, like, are there any of those what we've called before queer slippages that we might see in relation to characters who are most likely not written as trans characters, but who the readership or the fandom have been able to see themselves represented in?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 28:06

Oh, absolutely. And this is when it ties back to thematic feelings rather than, you know, specific physical descriptions. Nymphadora Tonks is often read by trans readers and queer readers to be unintentionally queer and impossibly trans due to the way she can reshape and transform her body at will. There's a level I think of envy coming from some readers and including myself at that point, but there's also a level of just as how Stryker talks about how there's a parallel between the trans body medically reshaped and the Frankenstein's monster medically built the idea of intentionally and completely on your own reshaping your body, deciding to reshape your body, it has trans undertones for sure.

Hannah McGregor 28:52

So that is an example of how trans readers might see something as trans coded in a positive generative way. But since we are probably going to be talking about Rita Skeeter as a character who is not transcoded in a positive, generative way, can we talk a little bit more about what code is used when a character is being transcoded in a bad faith representation?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 29:23

Yeah, absolutely. So the language is not going to be unsurprising to anyone who has followed things like bathroom debates or pronoun debates. This has been here basically since the beginning of trans theory. Mary Daly, who was a rad feminist in the 20th century characterized trans folks as the agents of quote “a necrophiliac invasion of female space”.

Hannah McGregor 29:47

Can I pause you there? Can you explain what a rad feminist is? Because I would say rad feminist is like, yeah, I like her, she's a rad feminist, but I don't think that's what you mean.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 29:58

Yeah. So when I say a radical feminist I mean, as in the second, the final two letters of TERF, trans exclusionary radical feminist. The idea that feminism is only for cis women. So this TERFy idea that Mary Daly says is still going on today, obviously. In 2014 a publication by Sheila Jeffrey's called *Gender Hurts* a feminist analysis of the politics of transgenderism is a good example of what Stryker called the resurgence of a transphobic feminist discourse that we kind of thought had died down.

This is the same year that transgender studies quarterly was published. So you can see that there's very much an interrelation between a trans move, and transphobic pushback. So stuff like Jeffrey's work characterizes trans women as subversive, terroristic, dangerous, or pathetic, it paints trans people as

inherently creepy and invasive. The fear of invasion is a big one here. So Patricia Elliot and Lawrence Lyons, they actually analyze this book by Jeffrey's. And in it, they find that in her text, trans women are perceived not only as the evil deceivers and make believers but also as possessing control over others that so-called "biological women" scare quotes included do not possess.

Hannah McGregor 31:24

Okay, so buried in this bad faith, fundamentally transphobic set of stereotypes is this myth that like trans women transition to sneak into bathrooms.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 31:41

Or any female space.

Hannah McGregor 31:42

Women's sports, everybody really cares about women's sports suddenly, they don't care about it when it comes to funding it or airing it on networks ever.

Marcelle Kosman 31:52

Or like celebrating major accomplishments. Who, okay,

Hannah McGregor 31:57

So let's say hypothetically, if we were to have a character transformed into a bug to sneak into a children's school, that would maybe be bad faith transcoding?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 32:14

Gosh, you could say that, I mean, I think that threatening children is one of the greatest fears of transphobic portrayal. And to profit from that.

Hannah McGregor 32:27

(laughs) Okay, enough, enough, glibness. Let's talk about Rita Skeeter. *(Soundbite of cricket chirping)*

(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)

Everyone keeping up? Perfect, because it is time for the world's most low stakes exam. It's OWL's! ***(Soundbite of owl hooting)***

Marcelle Kosman 32:52
(laughs) I didn't even study.

Hannah McGregor 32:55
So, Taylor, let's talk about Rita Skeeter. ***(Soundbite of cricket chirping)***

I maybe want to start by pointing out that way back, years ago, in the original run of this podcast, when I personally was somebody who had never read any trans studies, any trans theory, was not a sophisticated thinker about gender and cis normativity, which we could say is sort of the trans studies version of heteronormativity. Right? This sort of idea of compulsory cis identity, even then, I read the description of Rita Skeeter, and was like, hey, JK, this seems a little transphobic.

Marcelle Kosman 33:40
One of the things that I remember very viscerally from that first run is when we were talking about Rita Skeeter, as transcoded. I didn't know at that time how to separate an analysis of someone as being negatively transcoded, from transphobia itself. So like, Oh, am I just transphobic because I see this and like the answer is that most salespeople do carry around a bunch of transphobic baggage.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 34:12
To be fair, many trans people do too.

Marcelle Kosman 34:14
You know, the world is a really terrible place for all of us.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 34:19
It's straight up not fun out here.

Hannah McGregor 34:23

(laughs) So, Marcelle, I think you've really hit on something that invites us to look closer at the text to say, you know, how is it that we mark in this text that what we're seeing is not simply neutral transcoding, but a sort of insidious, dangerous transphobic transcoding. So maybe let's just start with our first description of Rita Skeeter. So here's how she described, quote, "her hair was set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy jawed face, she wore jeweled spectacles, the thick fingers clutching her crocodile skin handbag ended in two inch nails, painted crimson. Her Scarlet taloned fingers had Harry's upper arm and a surprisingly strong grip." So there's a fair amount of language there that tells us right away that we are supposed to be reading Rita Skeeter as aberrant.

So we've got the words "curiously, oddly, surprisingly." So lots of things that are saying right off the get go from the first sentence that we are meeting this character, that there is something off about her.

Marcelle Kosman 35:48

And then combined with that we have these other adjectives that are sort of deliberately masculine, like, heavy jawed face and thick fingers. And then the surprisingly strong grip, like these are all things that are positive when associated with male characters and negative when associated with female characters.

Hannah McGregor 36:10

Yeah, and later on the text, just straight up calls her ma-nish like that is a language used to deride women.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 36:17

I think it's interesting too, if you look at exactly when those surprise and those masculine features are put into play, we find out that her curls are curiously rigid, we find out that she has jeweled spectacles. The weird thing about her hands is not just

that they're thick, but that they have these long nails. So there's this hyper femininity at the same time that you have these masculine features.

Hannah McGregor 36:42

Yeah, and that hyper femininity, which is very frequently associated with a kind of like, poisonous, what one might even call a toxic femininity, that she wears acid green robes, and that she is scarlet taloned. So she's got this femininity that is signaled via the way it's described as being dangerous and violent, that is then accompanied by this language of literally man-ishness.

Marcelle Kosman 37:19

One of the so called feminist criticisms of trans women is often these arguments about how like, it's not usually articulated like this, but oh, the way that they perform femininity is harmful to women because it reproduces these expectations. So reading this passage is making me think about how that criticism is embedded in this description of Rita Skeeter. Right? So like, whether the text explicitly says she is trans or cis, the text is saying that the way that she's performing femininity is toxic, is unhealthy, does reproduce these unreasonable expectations.

Hannah McGregor 38:03

Yeah, yeah, that she is, she is doing too much. He is too feminine in a sort of costumey way.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 38:10

Thinking about this, you could take a list of her outfits and you could put together a pretty good drag outfit. And if a transcoded character is just a drag queen, that's a complete misunderstanding of what being trans is. Not the drag queens aren't amazing, they are.

Marcelle Kosman 38:28

This might actually be a really useful opportunity to touch on the difference between what is drag versus being trans. Just as a clarification for listeners who might not be sure of the difference.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 38:41

Drag is a specific performance of an aesthetic, whether that is a monstrously feminine aesthetic, as we see from drag queens like Evie Oddly, for instance, or a hyper feminine aesthetic that draws on a lot of the cultural associations with femininity or with gender, not necessarily just with women, to create a vision and a performance. And it's something you take off afterwards. And I will say something that is often ignored: drag queens can absolutely be trans, they are in no way in opposition to one another. However, a trans woman who is a drag queen is a woman in and out of drag, and a cis man who is a drag queen uses she/her pronouns, is a drag queen, in drag only.

Hannah McGregor 39:26

Okay, so I think we've established pretty clearly that the physical description of Rita Skeeter is fucked up in specifically transphobic ways.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 39:38

Here's a twist coming.

Hannah McGregor 39:39

So what's the twist? Let's talk about this twist.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 39:41

Well, there are several twists here, but the obvious one is that she can turn into a beetle. (***Soundbite of cricket chirping***) She can change her body. She has gone through an extensive process to illegally secretly change her body so that she can sneak into places she isn't allowed.

Marcelle Kosman 40:01

And unlike the previous book where we learn about this, and we're like, wow, what great friends! In this book that's bad and wrong.

Hannah McGregor 40:14

I mean, we've seen, like so we have three other Anignmus, Animagi?

Marcelle Kosman 40:21

Some people say Animagi, I stand by Animagi. But you know what? We're all different.

Hannah McGregor 40:27

Anni-Magi, we had three unregistered ones in the last book. We interpreted that as like a beautiful celebration of friendship and the way that friendship transforms you. And so we need to think about not just the fact that Rita Skeeter is an unregistered Animagus, which, at this point, it seems like are there any Annimagi that are registered? Taylor, how many registered Animagi are there?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 40:56

Seven. Seven. One of them is McGonagle.

Hannah McGregor 40:59

So we've got seven registered and at least four unregistered and probably more. So not all unregistered Animagi are treated with suspicion or considered dangerous. So what is it about Rita Skeeter as an unregistered Animagus that makes her seem dangerous, like more dangerous than like Scabbers?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 41:26

This is something that haunts me, because there is an unregistered Animagus who sneaks into Hogwarts and then does murder and he is treated with less suspicion than Rita Skeeter, who like yeah, sells somebody's secrets, lots of secrets, causes a lot of damage is generally a bad person, but significantly, has never joined a hate group.

Marcelle Kosman 41:49

Yeah, that is accurate. I mean, Rita Skeeter is a tabloid writer. We can criticize and disagree with the politics of writing tabloids. But by and large, I feel like we as a society know what tabloids are and what tabloid writers do and it shouldn't come as such a shock that they twist the truth to make for more sensational stories. And yet this character is our primary villain. We can't escape her.

Hannah McGregor 42:27

I had already drawn this mental connection between the duplicity and sneakiness of Rita Skeeter as a character, and how she's constantly misrepresenting situations for her own gain. But I also wonder if there is something particular happening here in terms of her control of the media, and a particular sort of moral panic that happens around TERF's in the UK, in particular. This idea that trans people have gotten control of the media. So being, quote, unquote, "gender critical" is no longer allowed. Because there is like one correct opinion that is being produced. I mean, it's a fundamentally false narrative as the constant transphobic content in British media shows us but it is also a particular site of the moral panic happening around trans people right now, is this fixation on media representation.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 43:33

I'm convinced. I'm convinced by that reading.

Hannah McGregor 43:37

There's this part of me that's like, we are doing significant theoretical work here to argue that a character who is described as a man-ish monstrous creature who learned how to physically transform her body so she could sneak into places she's not allowed, and uses that power to control media narratives is a transphobic representation, when it's one of those things where it's like, here, let we're gonna really show you the work, but like, Come the fuck on.

Marcelle Kosman 44:09

Like, how else are we supposed to read this character?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 44:13

There's a pretty handy quote from the article I was putting earlier by Patricia Elliot and Lawrence Lyons, where they describe how the transphobes use trans women "sneaky, deceptive and invasive, deceitful and plotting, the unwoman" as they call it, "is imagined to change her sex in order to betray and harm women." If you take that sentence and you replace change her sex with change her body in order to betray and harm, if you switch women with children. That is literally just a description of Rita Skeeter's actions throughout the book.

Hannah McGregor 44:49

Yep. So we talked in the previous segment about queer and trans fans really embracing Tonks, for example, as a positively transcoded character. Is there any fan embrace reclaiming Rita Skeeter?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 45:06

You know, not that I've seen. But I haven't been particularly active in the Harry Potter fandom for at least a year. So maybe, especially because the conversation has really come up more frequently this past year, in the past couple years, than the five years before it, whereas Tonks was kind of getting that attention already. So I don't know. I can't say for sure, I would suspect not.

And this is something that has been bothering me since kind of we started thinking about Rita Skeeter in this way, since I started thinking about Rita skier in this way, which is that even if Rita Skeeter was not a transphobic figure whatsoever, even if Rita Skeeter was not problematic at all in her gender presentation, it is an incredibly misogynistic representation of a woman as well. Whether a trans woman or a cis woman, this is a really nasty way, and I do say nasty purposefully, to portray a woman.

Hannah McGregor 46:07

Yeah, in that sense, Rita Skeeter is a real precursor of Umbridge.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 46:12

Yes, but unlike Umbridge, Rita Skeeter is always sidelined by those with power. She's always seen as, her power is seen as kind of grasping at straws. I think that's one of the reasons why there's a lot of hand imagery for her because she is constantly grasping, and Umbridge at various points is able to deploy her manipulative abilities to have power. Rita never really gets there. Rita is defeated by a 14 year old girl.

Marcelle Kosman 46:43

Taylor, I think you bring up a really good point here, because the fact that Hermione, a 14 year old girl, albeit, you know a very clever witch, the brightest of her age, however, we will, however, we want to describe her, the fact that a 14 year old child is able to capture Rita Skeeter, and then manipulate her into doing what they want. I think it feeds into the idea of untrustworthiness in a way that I think we haven't quite gotten to yet because it's related to one's ability to be manipulated. So the fact that Hermione, who is a 14 year old child, can capture and manipulate Rita Skeeter into doing the bidding of these other children. Like if Hermione can do it, surely anybody can do it. Like all you have to do is find out this terrible secret. And then you suddenly have control over Rita Skeeter, and what she's able to write and publish and produce.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 47:51

You talked in the podcast episode on Lupin, or one of the podcast episodes on Lupin, about the way that he is dismissed from his job as a threat. This is a kind of similar thing, where if you're outed, your life is ruined. That's the case for a lot of queer people, especially in the 90s, when this is set. That's a case for a lot of trans people. Luckily, a little less so now, because discrimination

laws include trans people, but not entirely, it's not entirely safe to come out.

Hannah McGregor 48:23

Yeah, not only are we being shown that being outed is dangerous and is a way of controlling this character. But we're also being shown that it's incredibly easy to do, that there is something about the fact that like a 14 year old can do it. And the fact that her transcoding is so heavy handed, that the presumed 14 year old readership is also being, I think, encouraged to see that there is something wrong, quote unquote, "wrong" with Rita Skeeter, is telling us something as well about the idea that like not only are trans people transforming themselves to sneak into spaces they shouldn't be in, but it is incredibly easy to spot them and stop them.

I think within a lot of transphobic discourse, there is this double edged idea that both that trans people are insidiously invading spaces where they should not be, but also that trans people are highly legible. And so an assumption that I have also made and have been learning to unmake is the assumption that you can read people's gender and that would extend to saying, you know, none of the students in my class this semester are trans. Like, well, how the fuck would you know, that is still based on the assumption that I can tell somebody is trans by looking at them, which I cannot, nobody can and so the fact that a 14 year old cracked the mystery also does present transness as both dangerous, but also child's play.

Marcelle Kosman 50:09

I don't know if this is super useful or not, but it's making me think about arguments about being out in the military and stuff. The argument being that you can't have queers in the military because their secret queerness can be used as a weapon against them. And while this should be an argument for Well, how about we just like, openly accept queers in the military, instead it's an argument

being used for well, this is why we can't have queers in the military. And so it's like, so I feel like there's something similar happening with Rita Skeeter, where it's like, this should be an argument for if we're just like, down with trans acceptance, then you can't manipulate somebody by holding over them the secret that you were able to discover but is apparently like enough to throw off their entire career were it to get out.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 51:02

But we're not down with Rita Skeeter. The text doesn't want us to be down with Rita Skeeter. It's not even a negative that she can be manipulated. It is a vast positive in Harry's life that she can be. In this reading, it's a good thing that transness can be manipulated. And it's a good thing that trans people can have that used against them *because* it makes them easier to control.

Hannah McGregor 51:22

Mm hmm. Yeah, it becomes the secret itself is the problem rather than the requirement for it to be kept a secret, right? So like, the problem becomes that she is hiding something. Not that she is required to hide that thing. That is a distinction that, like, you drive people underground in their identities by pathologizing their identities, and then frame the hiddenness of their identities as a sign of their inherent deceptiveness or danger. And it's like, cool, cool, well, that is a neat trap.

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 52:09

So we've been talking a lot about trans folks and trans rights and I think it's trans rights if we end so that I can go get a glass of wine.

(Hannah and Marcelle laugh)

(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)

Marcelle Kosman 52:32

Thank you, witches, for joining us for episode 24 of *Witch, Please*. You can find the rest of our episodes by heading over to

NotSorryWorks.com or ohwitchplease.ca, or of course wherever podcasts are found. If you want to hang out with us more, we're on Twitter and Instagram @ohwitchplease. Taylor, where can people find you if they want to know more about your work?

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 52:57

I'm on Twitter at @tay_a_f and you can basically always find me there.

Content warning. I do talk a lot about Taylor Swift.

(Marcelle laughs)

Hannah McGregor 53:11

Witch, Please is produced in partnership with Not Sorry and distributed by Acast. Special thanks to Not Sorry for having us, and to our team-player of a producer, Hannah Rehak aka COACH!

Marcelle Kosman 53:23

Thanks coach. **(Soundbite of sports whistle blowing)**

If you're into the podcast, why don't you let us know by dropping a review on Apple Podcasts. At the end of every episode we'll shout out everyone who left us a 5-star review, so you've gotta review us if you want to hear me struggling painfully through your increasingly destructive usernames aloud. thanks this week to theMstack, Mimmi.Ingrid, Melig8r, Maf9193, resiecakes, Sheenamko, Gab._y, and **(gasps)** marcelleyouredoinggreat. **(laughs)** Wow, bless all of you so much!

Hannah McGregor 54:48

If you want to hear even more from us, don't forget to head over to patreon.com/ohwitchplease to check out the many, exciting forms of bonus content available to you including our new PREFECTS tier and they are so beautiful and you really don't want to miss out! In our next episode we're continuing our discussion of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. But until then:

Taylor Allgeier-Follett 55:17

Later witches!

(Witch, Please Theme Music plays) (Dance of the Priestesses by Victor Herbert Orchestra)