Harry Potter and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion?
or
Carelessness, cultural memory and mythic figures

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During the Christmas holiday – in that lull between revelations about lockdown parties and before war returned to Europe – the Chichester Centre for Fairy Tales, Fantasy and Speculative Fiction was contacted by the Mail Online looking for a comment about Jon Stewart's accusation that J.K. Rowling was an anti-Semite. The approach was typical of this sort of thing: no attempt made to address the email to a named person and certainly no mention of a fee, just the assumption that the Centre's research is available for free and can be produced almost instantaneously. Caught between a natural antipathy towards the Mail Online and the potential for free publicity for the Centre and for the University of Chichester, I produced an informative piece which was presumably too balanced for the Mail and thus did not appear in the story which became increasingly confused as the Mail Online's editors simply added more and more material to the story (mostly tweets).[1] Predictably, comments attached to the story and on Twitter included those defending Rowling on the grounds that the comments about anti-Semitism were another attempt to 'cancel' the bestselling author, part of the controversy accompanying Rowling's statements about the trans community and women-only spaces. The collapse of the story into a more binary construction in which the actual question was lost, subsumed within a general collection of 'culture wars' skirmish-points, resulted in a failure to actual engage with the substance of Jon Stewart's initial accusation. This was not helped by Stewart rapidly stating he had not claimed that Rowling was an anti-Semite.[2]

Stewart's argument – although directed against Rowling – was also concerned with the film adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.* There I have some sympathy with Stewart's point. As a bookseller throughout the entire run of the Harry Potter series, my relationship with Rowling's sequence was based around panicked telephone calls on publication day looking for our consignments (from the fourth book onwards), lugging wheeled cages full of boxes of hardback copies of the latest release from a loading bay to a storeroom, refusing bribes from customers going on holiday at three o'clock in the afternoon who were desperate

to buy a copy of the heavily embargoed book which was banned from sale until midnight, and stealing sales from a rival shop by having a Saturday member of staff tie a black piece of material around his neck, stick some stars to it, and run around Gatwick's South Terminal pretending to be Harry Potter. When I finally saw *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* around ten years after its initial release, I was surprised at the portrayal of the goblins as it seemed to be clearly drawing upon deep-rooted anti-Semitic tropes. That 'tradition' is less obvious in Rowling's original text in which the first goblin encountered by Harry Potter at Gringotts is described as having 'a swarthy, clever face, a pointed beard and … very long fingers and feet'.[3] 'Swarthy' may give us pause, but it is difficult to make the case that it is anti-Semitic in the way the visual representation of the same character in the film adaptation causes disquiet.

While Rowling cannot ultimately be blamed for the cinematic representation of a feature of her novel, she did make the decision to make goblins the bankers of her wizarding world. This was always potentially problematic in that the convention of using the word 'goblin' to stand in for 'Jew' – and thus making a connection between 'goblins', money and banking – suggests a well-established anti-Semitic trope. However, it is not necessarily the case that Rowling was consciously using an anti-Semitic image. Rather, in a book which is almost entirely formed from elements found in existing fairy tales, folklore, fantasy books and films, and children's literature, Rowling employed a well-established fantasy/folkloric creature without necessarily being aware that goblins have 'stood in' for Jewish people in earlier texts. It is an example of carelessness on the part of Rowling and her editors. It is similar to concerns expressed about the house elves being slaves, and the freeing of Dobby being an example of a white saviour narrative – Rowling was not consciously writing that type of text but wider culture and history means that construction is possible. Rowling and her editors should have been more aware and taken greater care. Someone – the author or the editor or someone at Bloomsbury – should have been aware of the cultural history of the goblin.

If it was careless, then it was an odd slippage as such carelessness in relation to myth or folkloric elements is not always apparent in Rowling's work. Rowling or her editors do demonstrate a clear engagement with existing cultural ideas about mythic or fantasy figures or locations. The dangerous nature of woods and forests in fairy tales is apparent very early in the Harry Potter series: the first real indication of the return of Voldemort, manifested in the butchery of a unicorn, takes place in the Forbidden Forest.[4] This longstanding construction of forests or woods as places of danger is extended by Rowling to include the idea of such locations being a place of sexual threat. This construction is discernible in texts like 'Red Riding Hood' and 'Snow White'. This thematic use of the woods is also present in the Harry Potter series; its appearance is surely deliberate. When Dolores Umbridge is carried away screaming by a group of centaurs in the Forbidden Forest in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the cultural history of both the location and the centaurs suggests a threat of sexual violence to Umbridge;[5] this prompts the suggestion among the online Harry Potter community that Umbridge is gang-raped by the centaurs.[6] If the rape theory is correct, we may also find an

echo of an earlier fantasy literary use of the connection of centaurs with the sexual violation of human women. In Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Albertina, the daughter of the titular doctor and the muse of the hero Desiderio, is horrifically gang-raped by a group of centaurs.[7] Carter knows the historical reputation of the centaur; it is likely that Rowling was similarly aware and as such has her centaurs act in a similar, albeit less explicit, fashion. But, if that is the case, it makes the use of the goblins at the bank, and the apparent ignorance about the use of the goblin as an anti-Semitic device, more surprising.

The comments on the Mail Online's story about Rowling and conscious or unconscious anti-Semitism prompted the predictable rhetorical question as to which other beloved fantasy writers would be accused of a similar offence. The response was equally predictable, with J.R.R. Tolkien named as the next fantasy author likely to be the victim of attempted 'cancelling'. Of course, any commentator making that observation was ignoring – deliberately or through genuine lack of knowledge – critical comments about Tolkien and race in the *Legendarium*. Gordon McMullan has suggested that Gollum is partly a satirical portrait of Sir Israel Gollancz, Professor of English at King's College, London, an important cultural figure in the early 20th century and known as 'goblin' to at least one of his friends.[8] If we can see the Jewish Gollancz behind Gollum, then Gollum's obsession with the ring may be an evocation of negative constructions of Judaism. In a similar vein, if the dwarves in *The Hobbit* are partly inspired by the exile of the Jewish people, then the apparent avarice of Thorin Oakenshield may mark the use of anti-Semitic ideas and images. We also have to consider the extent to which Tolkien was making use of Norse and other Northern European mythology in his construction of the dwarves and the idea of rings of power. However, this latter point may be ultimately unhelpful in that one of Tolkien's Northern European influences was almost certainly Wagner and it is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that Wagner was an anti-Semite and thus his construction of dwarves, particularly the avariciousness of Alberich, is based on anti-Semitic tropes which we may see repeated in Tolkien's work. In the case of Tolkien, it is far easier to make the case of deliberate use of culturally embedded ideas about Judaism, including the employment of anti-Semitic images.

A more recent probable appearance of encoded Jews in fantasy literature is to found in *The Witcher* series of novels by Andrzej Sapkowski. When Sapkowski writes about a 'pogrom' being committed against the dwarves,[9] it is clear that he is evoking the history of anti-Semitic attacks in Europe. The same phenomenon of violence and religious hatred is found referenced in the novel series in the spectre of a 'compulsory "non-human" donation' which finances a war of extermination against a group of elves.[10] Sapkowski is deliberate in this use of language and historical analogue in a text which is partly referencing the breakdown of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania and the collapse of religious toleration which had made that part of Europe a haven for Europe's persecuted Jews.[11]

If Rowling did use goblins in relation to banking without any awareness of earlier uses of goblins in anti-Semitic discourse then she is not the only person to be unaware of the deep

history and older, often prejudiced use of mythical figures. This historical-mythical ignorance is similar to the lack of awareness of Jack and the Beanstalk's unconscious engagement with longstanding constructions of giants as both another species (which we find in the Book of Genesis) and a religious enemy. In the 16th and 17th centuries there are accounts of a number of giants and 'wild men' in Sussex. In these accounts, the accusation of 'wildness' and brutality is usually coding for Recusancy after the suppression of Roman Catholicism in England.[12] The claim that the giants and wild men are cannibals is also part of this religious controversy, with cannibalism standing in for Catholic belief in transubstantiation, which was read as a type of cannibalism by more extreme Protestants. The giant in 'Jack and the Beanstalk' and 'Jack the Giant Killer' 'smelling the blood of an English man' is an unintentional echo of this construction of the giant, and Jack becomes a great English (and Protestant) hero.

However, lack of awareness of a very geographically specific use of giants in religio-political discourse four hundred years ago is different from an apparent lack of recognition of the problematic connection of a creature previously used as an encoded reference to 'Jew' with banking. Rowling and her editors should have known better; the producers of the cinematic adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* certainly should have recognised the deeply troubling nature of the visual representation of the character. Unless we have reached a stage where this type of cultural anti-Semitism is so embedded, has been accepted for so long, that most people no longer recognise the offensiveness of the stereotype. That may be the most troubling aspect of the whole episode.

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1. https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10368289/Jon-Stewart-accuses-JK-Rowling-anti-Semitism-Harry-Potter.html?msclkid=d915912cb1b111ecbfed8b7b1abf6806 (accessed 1 April 2022).
2. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/jan/06/jon-stewart-denies-claims-he-accused-jk-rowling-of-antisemitism?msclkid=3a45f57cb70711eca803628845ff4190 (accessed 1 April 2022).
3. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 56.
4. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,* 186-7.
5. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Bloomsbury: London, 2003), 666.
6. This is indicative of the argument: https://www.reddit.com/r/harrypotter/comments/tsa9o/i_never_realized_that_umbridge_was_actually_raped/?msclkid=b11e2e0fb70711ec89015dd9b7f276b1 (accessed 1 April 2022).
7. Angela Carter, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (London: Penguin, 2011), 216-17.
8. Gordon McMullan, 'Remembering and Forgetting in 1916: Israel Gollancz, the Shakespeare Tercentenary and the National Theatre', *Shakespeare Survey* 70, vol. 70 (2017), 40-9.
9. Andrzej Sapkowski, *Blood of Elves* (London: Gollancz, 2020), 143.
10. Sapkowski, *The Time of Contempt* (London: Gollancz, 2020), 57.
11. The breakdown of religious toleration and a guarded multi-ethnic communalism is introduced very early in the narrative, see *Blood of Elves*, 9, 17.
12. Jacqueline Simpson, *The Folklore of Sussex* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1973), 31-2.