

Blogpost full of words

Even if you don't follow politics, you're probably familiar by now with the Internet meme "binders full of women," which took off earlier this week after Mitt Romney used the phrase in his second presidential debate with Barack Obama.

The rapid circulation of variations on that meme, exemplified by the [Tumblr blog of the same name](#), is a superb illustration of how the Internet has unleashed new forms of rip-mix-burn creativity.

I still think the best entry in the [lolcats](#) genre of binder-humor is [this one](#), which superimposes the words "Trap Her Keep Her" over a Trapper Keeper notebook. Lewis Carroll might not have approved the ironic message here, but he might well have admired the wordplay.

Speaking of words, the phrase "binders full of women" turns out to be a beautiful illustration of something else we've discussed: the dependence of meaning on context. This dependence, in fact, is part of what made Romney's use of the phrase so vulnerable to humor. The phrase has no meaning *apart from* the particular context in which it's used. It doesn't *by itself* mean, for example, either "binders containing information about potential female job candidates" or "binders containing female bodies." Take the phrase out the context in which Romney used it to mean the former, and a variety of meanings become possible, including the latter, which, once visualized in lolcats form, in turn takes on a symbolic meaning of its own — a symbolic meaning that is itself activated by the context of the way many women today feel about their status in our particular cultural moment.

As it happens, the dependence of meaning on context was the topic of a [recent blog post by the literary critic Stanley Fish](#), who used this fact as an argument against literalist interpretations of the U.S. Constitution.

As Meghan recently observed [in a post on her own blog](#), words really do matter.

Update: Egads! It's [The Yellow Wallpaper!](#)