

Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County
Case No.: C-02-CV-23-000543

UNREPORTED
IN THE APPELLATE COURT
OF MARYLAND*

No. 737

September Term, 2024

CHERYL STOUFFER HOOD,

v.

DREW TAYLOR, JR.

Tang,
Kehoe, S.,
Raker, Irma S.
(Senior Judge, Specially Assigned)

JJ.

Opinion by Tang, J.

Filed: April 28, 2026

*This is an unreported opinion. This opinion may not be cited as precedent within the rule of stare decisis. It may be cited for its persuasive value only if the citation conforms to Md. Rule 1-104(a)(2)(B).

This appeal arises from social media posts by the appellants, Brandy Hood (“Brandy”) and her aunt, Cheryl Stouffer Hood (“Cheryl”), accusing the appellee, Drew Taylor, Jr. (“Taylor”), of child abuse.¹ In the Circuit Court for Anne Arundel County, Taylor filed a complaint against Cheryl and Brandy alleging defamation, intentional infliction of emotional distress, and publishing statements that placed him in a false light. A jury found in Taylor’s favor and awarded him compensatory and punitive damages.

Cheryl and Brandy separately noted timely appeals. Proceeding *pro se*, each filed an informal brief raising different issues in this Court. Thereafter, Brandy filed a notice of bankruptcy, resulting in a stay of her appeal.² Consequently, we address only the appeal noted by Cheryl. She presents four issues, which we quote from her informal brief:

1. Compensatory damages awarded to [Taylor].

¹ Because the two appellants share the last name Hood, we will refer to each by her first name for clarity and convenience. To preserve privacy interests, we refer to non-party witnesses by their relationships to the parties.

² See Voluntary Petition under Ch. 13 of the Bankr. Code, Case No. 25-13883, U.S. Bankr. Ct. for Dist. of Md. (filed Apr. 30, 2025); Order of June 13, 2025 by Cir. Ct. for Anne Arundel Cnty., Case No. C-02-CV-23-000543. With exceptions not relevant here, filing for bankruptcy protection “operates as a stay, applicable to all entities, of . . . the . . . continuation . . . of a judicial . . . proceeding against the debtor that was . . . commenced before the commencement of the [bankruptcy] case . . . to recover a claim against the debtor that arose before the commencement of the [bankruptcy] case[,]” as well as any other “enforcement, against the debtor or against property of the estate, of a judgment obtained before the commencement of” that bankruptcy case. 11 U.S.C. § 362(a)(1)–(2). Because “suit against a codefendant is not automatically stayed by the debtor’s bankruptcy filing,” a judgment debtor’s filing of a bankruptcy petition stays his appeal but not the appeal of a co-defendant who was found separately liable. See *Queenie, Ltd. v. Nygard Int’l*, 321 F.3d 282, 287 (2d Cir. 2003) (citation omitted).

By Order entered on April 24, 2026, this Court bifurcated the appeals into two separate cases. Cheryl’s appeal retains case number ACM-REG-0737-2024, and Brandy’s appeal has been assigned a new case number: ACM-REG-2556-2024.

2. Punitive damages awarded to [Taylor].
3. The jury was rushed and the judge rushed through the entire trial. Also, the defendants were tried together.
4. Multiple distractions and interruptions during the trial.

For the reasons stated below, we will affirm the judgment against Cheryl.

BACKGROUND

During a two-day jury trial, both Taylor and Cheryl testified, while Brandy did not. We summarize the relevant evidence presented during the trial. In doing so, we acknowledge that Taylor and Cheryl had differing viewpoints on the matter. However, we do not review and weigh the parties' respective contentions. Instead, we recount the facts in the light most favorable to Taylor, the prevailing party below. *See Green v. McClintock*, 218 Md. App. 336, 341 (2014).

Brandy and Taylor share custody of their young daughter (the "Child"). In the afternoon of March 5, 2022, Taylor and the Child attended a family gathering. During the event, the Child jumped on a trampoline. After getting off the trampoline, she went inside, sat down, and urinated on herself. She then expressed that she "felt funny" and was tired. Noticing a change in the Child's behavior and demeanor, Taylor decided to take her home and ultimately called 911. He accompanied the Child to the hospital emergency room and notified Brandy. In the ambulance, the Child "started laughing and she said, Daddy, there's two of you."

The Child's neurological symptoms did not resolve overnight. The MRI and EEG tests did not reveal any issues. Initially, doctors believed the Child had suffered a concussion, so she was discharged to Brandy with instructions to follow up with a doctor.

When the Child returned home from the hospital, Cheryl became concerned about marks she saw on the Child’s body, including bruising in the pubic area. As a result, she accompanied Brandy and the Child to a medical center to report the observed marks.

After a series of hospitalizations and evaluations during the ensuing seven-month period, the Child was diagnosed with rapid-onset dystonia parkinsonism.³

At issue in this case is what happened during the weeks and months before doctors pinpointed the Child’s illness. Both Cheryl and Brandy made a series of social media posts in which they attributed the Child’s condition to Taylor’s “abuse” while she was in his care. During cross-examination at trial, Cheryl acknowledged that no one had provided her with evidence of Taylor being a child abuser.

We summarize the relevant parts of these posts.

Cheryl’s Posts

After the Child’s hospitalization and discharge, Brandy sought emergency custody of the Child. On March 18, 2022, a magistrate heard the matter. Cheryl attended the hearing. After the hearing, the magistrate denied Brandy’s request, finding that she failed to produce any evidence that Taylor was responsible for the Child’s condition.

³ “Rapid-onset dystonia parkinsonism (RDP), a hereditary form of dystonia, is characterized by the abrupt onset of slowness of movement (parkinsonism) and dystonic symptoms.” *Rapid-Onset Dystonia Parkinsonism*, Dystonia Med. Rsch. Found., <https://dystonia-foundation.org/what-is-dystonia/types-dystonia/rapid-onset/#:~:text=The%20classic%20features%20of%20RDP,to%20the%20age%20of%2058> [https://perma.cc/3QM2-UNTB] (last visited Apr. 15, 2026). Among “[t]he classic features of RDP” are “involuntary dystonic spasms in the limbs, prominent involvement of the speech and swallowing muscles, slowness of movement, and poor balance.” *Id.* at Symptoms.

Despite this ruling, Cheryl accused Taylor of abusing the Child on social media.

After the hearing, she posted on Facebook:

How can a so called “father” cause physical and other abuse to 7 year old child, leave her in a catatonic state, wait for more than 3 hours to seek medical help for her, change the “story” of the events that supposedly caused the child to be in this critical state

She continued, “I am going to make sure that I let as many people know this as I can in hopes that justice will be done! Shame on everyone . . . who support the child abuser father!”

At the bottom of this post, she shared a post by Brandy to provide “more details” about the outcome of the hearing, among other things. In the post Cheryl shared, Brandy stated that she “went to the police,” “CPS,” and “the court house in Annapolis to ask for emergency visitation to be taken away. . . .” Brandy’s post published Taylor’s home address, stating: “No One will protect my daughter from Drew Taylor Jr at [his home address]. After what he did to my child because I don’t have any proof that he did it or someone else.”

On April 12, 2022, Taylor’s attorney served on Cheryl a cease-and-desist letter, demanding that she stop posting false, defamatory, and damaging statements about Taylor concerning his alleged abuse of the Child. Despite receiving the letter, Cheryl continued to post statements accusing Taylor of child abuse. On April 24, 2022, Cheryl posted on a GoFundMe account:

[T]he father who is responsible for this continues to stalk our private Facebook pages It is truly sickening that they are walking around, eating, laughing, drinking, having fun, ect. [sic], while [the Child] lays in a hospital

bed, nearly 2 months now, unable to do anything except breathe on her own, and that is not all of the time!

(emphasis added).

On May 12, 2022, Cheryl posted:

[T]he family of the father . . . continues to tell false information. . . . but we have proven that the injuries sustained to this poor baby took place while having visitation with the father. Furthermore, he is still currently under criminal investigation by the police detective. . . . I literally DO NOT see anything funny about an innocent child being tortured I imagine he and his family are in fear of [the Child] healing and being able to speak again.

On May 21, 2022, Cheryl posted:

The Doctors were thinking there was a neurological issue but they have basically completed all tests (multiple times) that would point to neurological issues and still all tests remain Negative/Normal. They have reported that it's likely PTSD due to her traumatic injuries acquired while in her father's care.

Effect on Taylor

Taylor, his father, and his fiancée variously testified to the humiliation and emotional distress that Taylor endured as a result of these posts. Taylor experienced depression, struggled with insomnia, and expressed feelings of not wanting to live. He described how the posts, which included his home address, led to multiple individuals showing up at his door to harass him, forcing him to contact the police on several occasions. Additionally, while driving, Taylor was verbally harassed by another driver who honked, leaned out the window, and shouted accusations of being a pedophile at him.

Taylor's fiancée testified that he was no longer the same person. He experienced thoughts of self-harm, broke down in tears, and expressed anger and fear. He became reluctant to leave the apartment. Similarly, Taylor's father testified that after the child

abuse accusations, Taylor was deeply distraught, and his demeanor “totally changed.” Where once they had daily calls and visits, his father said he was now “lucky if [they] talked on the phone every other week maybe, if that.” Before, Taylor would never get angry, but now he was very depressed, prone to sudden outbursts.

Since these events, Taylor has been attending therapy sessions twice a week and started taking antidepressants along with a sleeping medication. After being accused of something he “did not do and would never ever do to one of my kids,” Taylor testified, “It’s not easy sleeping. It’s not easy getting up every day.”

Verdict

Before submitting the case to the jury, the trial court found, as a matter of law, that Cheryl’s and Brandy’s statements were defamatory *per se* and instructed the jury accordingly. By special verdicts, the jury found that both Cheryl and Brandy knew that their respective posts were false, they intentionally inflicted emotional distress upon Taylor through their posts, they placed him in a false light, and they acted with malice. Based on the jury’s award of damages, the trial court entered judgments against Cheryl for \$40,000 in compensatory damages and \$75,000 in punitive damages, and against Brandy for \$35,000 in compensatory damages and \$75,000 in punitive damages.

DISCUSSION

I.

Compensatory Damages

Cheryl argues that the jury’s award of compensatory damages is not supported by the record. As “Supporting Facts and Argument,” Cheryl asserts:

[Taylor] had no medical expenses, no lost wages or income, no property damage, no pain and suffering, no evidence of emotional distress, and no loss of consortium. Mr. Taylor, Jr. provided no evidence or documentation. He also stated that he was Harassed and threatened by the public. No evidence or police reports.

Regarding compensatory damages, the trial court instructed the jury to “consider any expenses, mental pain and suffering, fright, nervousness, indignity, humiliation, embarrassment and insult to which the plaintiff was subject as a direct result of the defendant or defendants’ conduct.” In addition,

A person who is [the] subject of a defamatory statement that was not made with actual malice must show actual damages in the form of financial loss, injury to reputation, mental anguish or some other tangible injury in order to obtain relief.

When a person is the subject of a defamatory statement that was made with actual malice, there’s a presumption that the statement caused the person harm and relief may be awarded even in the absence of the evidence of actual damages.

During closing argument, counsel for Taylor argued that he was entitled to “presumed damages” because “[w]hen someone makes these type of statements against you, it is presumed it’s going to have some effect upon you.”

Reading her informal brief and the record together, we understand Cheryl’s challenge regarding compensatory damages as specifically related to the defamation claim. To prove defamation, Taylor was required to establish that Cheryl made a false statement that exposed him “to public scorn, hatred, contempt[,] or ridicule, thereby discouraging others in the community from having a good opinion of, or associating with, that person,” *Seley-Radtke v. Hosmane*, 450 Md. 468, 482–83 (2016), and that he “suffered harm,” *Lindenmuth v. McCreer*, 233 Md. App. 343, 357 (2017). A publication is defamatory *per*

se when that statement “needs no explanation,” *Wineholt v. Westinghouse Elec. Corp.*, 59 Md. App. 443, 446 (1984), because its “injurious character is a self-evident fact of common knowledge of which the court takes judicial notice.” *Samuels v. Tschechtelin*, 135 Md. App. 483, 549 (2000). In such circumstances, “the words themselves impute the defamatory character” so that “no innuendo—no allegation or proof of extrinsic facts—is necessary.” *Indep. Newspapers, Inc. v. Brodie*, 407 Md. 415, 441 (2009). Notably, Cheryl does not challenge the trial court’s determination that her false accusations that Taylor “abused” the Child were defamatory *per se*.⁴

“[W]hen a statement is defamatory *per se* and made with malice, the plaintiff can recover three types of damages: actual (economic) damages, punitive damages, and presumed (or noneconomic) damages.” *Royall v. Dicks*, – Md. App. –, No. 597, Sept. Term

⁴ Indeed, Maryland courts consistently agree that statements may be defamatory *per se* when they falsely impute that the plaintiff committed a crime. *See, e.g., Caldor, Inc. v. Bowden*, 330 Md. 632 (1993) (false accusation of theft against employee); *Montgomery Ward & Co., Inc. v. Cliser*, 267 Md. 406 (1972) (false accusation of theft against customer); *Simon v. Robinson*, 221 Md. 200 (1959) (false allegation that plaintiff fraudulently diverted and converted funds for his own personal use); *Lewis v. Accelerated Transp.-Pony Express, Inc.*, 219 Md. 252, 254 (1959) (false statement that plaintiff’s truck stop was “nothing but a whore-house”); *Haines v. Campbell*, 74 Md. 158 (1891) (false allegation of arson); *Padgett v. Sweeting*, 65 Md. 404 (1886) (false allegation of perjury). False allegations of child abuse clearly fall within the scope of statements that may be defamatory *per se*. *See, e.g., Helinski v. Rosenberg*, 90 Md. App. 158, 165 (1992) (“The sexual abuse of a small child meets the criteria for slander *per se*: it is the kind of allegation that would expose the person about whom it was spoken to widespread scorn, hatred, and contempt. Moreover, sexual child abuse is a crime.”), *rev’d on other grounds*, 328 Md. 664, 675 (1992) (affirming that defendant defamed plaintiff by “brand[ing him] as a man who committed an act reviled by society, which also constitutes a felony”); accord David Elder, *Defamation: A Lawyer’s Guide* § 1:16 (Westlaw Dec. 2025 update) (recognizing that “imputations of a wide variety of serious criminal offenses qualify as slanderous *per se*,” including “parental sex abuse of a child” and “other child abuse and cruelty”).

2024, slip op. at 10 (filed Apr. 3, 2026) (emphases added). Pertinent here is the last of these three types of damages—presumed (or noneconomic) damages.

Maryland law “allows for the presumption of damages when a plaintiff establishes that a statement was defamatory *per se* and made with actual malice” because there is an underlying “presumption of harm to reputation . . . aris[ing] from the publication of words actionable *per se*.” *Harvey-Jones v. Coronel*, 239 Md. App. 145, 155 (2018); *see also Am. Stores Co. v. Byrd*, 229 Md. 5, 14 (1962) (“If the words and behavior are actionable *per se*, it is . . . unnecessary to either allege or prove special damages.”).

In the instant case, the presumption of harm arose because the trial court ruled that Cheryl’s social media posts were defamatory *per se*, and the jury found that she acted with actual malice. Consequently, Taylor was entitled to recover compensatory damages even though he did not suffer out-of-pocket expenses or other economic damages. Furthermore, we disagree with Cheryl’s assertion that there was no evidence that Taylor suffered pain and suffering, emotional distress, or that he was harassed and threatened by the public. As recounted above, Taylor, his father, and his fiancée variously testified to the harassment and mental distress that Taylor experienced because of these posts. For the reason stated, we see no error in the compensatory damages award.

II.

Punitive Damages

Next, Cheryl challenges the award of punitive damages. As “Supporting Facts and Argument[,]” Cheryl asserts that she “did not commit outrageous conduct and did not clearly intend to harm [Taylor]. I was and still only want help for the victim child”

In relevant part, the trial court instructed the jury as follows:

A defendant whose conduct is intentionally or recklessly [] extreme and outrageous and that causes the plaintiff severe emotional distress is liable for damages caused by that conduct.

...

Actual malice exists when a person making the false statement knew either that the statement was false or that it was almost certainly false or had obvious reasons to distrust the accuracy of the statement.

...

To award punitive damages, you must find by clear and convincing evidence that defense acted with malice.

...

Malice is a conduct motivated by evil motive, intent to injure, ill will or fraud. The purpose of punitive damage[s] is not to compensate the plaintiff, but to punish the defendant and deter others from the type of conduct in the future.

...

A person who's subject to a defamatory statement may be awarded punitive damage[s] if the defendant published the defamatory statement with actual knowledge that it was false.

It is difficult to discern Cheryl's argument based on her informal brief. Her issue statement mentions "punitive damages," which relates to the finding of malice. However, in the section entitled "Supporting Facts and Argument," she refers to "outrageous conduct," which seems to correspond with the jury's finding that Cheryl intended to cause Taylor emotional distress through her posts. Either way, Cheryl's argument essentially invites this Court to reweigh the evidence, which we will not do. This is because "it is the [trier of fact's] task, not the court's, to measure the weight of the evidence and to judge the credibility of witnesses." *State v. Manion*, 442 Md. 419, 431 (2015).

III.

Remaining Issues

Finally, Cheryl’s last two issues concern how the trial court conducted the trial. For her third issue, she claims that the court rushed the jury and rushed through the trial and should not have tried Cheryl and Brandy together. As “Supporting Facts and Argument,” Cheryl asserts:

Multiple times during the trial, the judge was urging the need to hurry the trial along. Furthermore, the 2 defendants were tried together, making it difficult to separate which Person did what. I believe this impacted the jury as both defendants were referred to as “Ms. Hood”.

For her fourth issue, she contends that there were multiple distractions and interruptions during trial. As “Supporting Facts and Argument,” Cheryl states:

As noted, the judge permitted [Taylor] to use his cellular device, turning to show His family and friends behind him. They were laughing and making a disturbance. There were even 2 women making a disturbance, with one being the opposing Attorney’s daughter, which sat behind the defendants then moved to the other side. Other distractions include a child being rambunctious and making noise. Last, A woman that was sitting with the plaintiff’s family and friends, made false Accusations against me. She caused a scene in the lobby/hallway. She demanded That the judge and jury be made aware of this supposed incident.

Cheryl points out different parts of the trial transcript as examples. Her counsel noted disruptive laughter to the court but did not lodge any objections in this regard or raise any objections with respect to the other issues. Accordingly, these issues were not preserved for review. *See* Md. Rule 8-131(a) (stating that ordinarily, an appellate court will not decide an issue unless it plainly appears by the record to have been raised in, or decided by, the trial court).

**JUDGMENT OF THE CIRCUIT COURT
FOR ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY
AGAINST APPELLANT CHERYL
STOUFFER HOOD AFFIRMED. COSTS
OF THIS APPEAL TO BE PAID BY
APPELLANT CHERYL STOUFFER
HOOD.**