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# Review of *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters* by Maya Barzilai

## **Abstract**

The golem crosses many borders. A popular culture icon and an enduring image of creative power, its hybridity contributes to its elusive nature. What it is and what it means shifts over time. Maya Barzilai's *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters* takes a unique approach. Deeply interdisciplinary, as one must be to explore such a complex and paradoxical figure, and drawing on religious, literary, cinematic, and historical contexts, Barzilai weaves a rich tapestry of golem narratives. All the while, Barzilai keeps a clear eye on the golem's ongoing association with war, seeing its birth in the clay trenches of World War One and tracing its later evolution as emblematic of nuclear weapons, computer technology, and Israeli military policy.

## **Keywords**

golems, Jewish myth, World War One, Jewish American literature

## **Disciplines**

English Language and Literature | Jewish Studies

*Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters*

New York: New York University Press, 2016.

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The golem crosses many borders. A popular culture icon and an enduring image of creative power, its hybridity contributes to its elusive nature. What it is and what it means shifts over time. Maya Barzilai's *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters* takes a unique approach. Deeply interdisciplinary, as one must be to explore such a complex and paradoxical figure, and drawing on religious, literary, cinematic, and historical contexts, Barzilai weaves a rich tapestry of golem narratives. All the while, Barzilai keeps a clear eye on the golem's ongoing association with war, seeing its birth in the clay trenches of World War One and tracing its later evolution as emblematic of nuclear weapons, computer technology, and Israeli military policy.

As Barzilai claims, others have written about the evolving shape of golem narratives, but her study is the first to focus primarily on cultural images of wartime violence. Beginning with the birth of the golem in the early part of the twentieth century, she then documents its travels from Europe to the United States and Israel and finally into postmodernity. She focuses on the story's "continual reshaping in the context of modern, as well as postmodern, warfare and its implications for Jewish populations and nations" (9). Touching on the intercultural negotiations that have transformed the story over time and place, she affirms the golem's ability to bridge high and low culture.

Chapter 1 focuses on Paul Wegener's three golem films. Deftly explaining how all three films contribute to the golem myth and to the popularity of the figure and the actor, she sees the 1914 film *Der Golem* as blurring the border between bodies and mud, the 1917 film *Der Golem und die Tänzerin* as wartime escapism, and the well-known 1920 film *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* as giving voice to criticism of Germany and its wartime conduct. I enjoyed learning that in the 1914 film, the golem was played by two figures—Wegener and a puppet double—but was startled by her reading of the third film (she sees the final dismantling of the giant by a blond Christian child as redemptive). I view the film differently, as more contradictory and ambivalent, but Barzilai's interpretation is well-supported and deserves attention. She unearths much important historical evidence of Wegener's wartime experiences, including a photo of Wegener himself in the trenches, and much helpful theoretical evidence to support her close reading of the film as not only redemptive but also as self-reflexive of the emerging film industry. The rabbi's telescope stands in for the camera and its ability to enable us to see differently. The golem becomes the embodiment of film spectatorship, representing the childlike pleasure of the viewer as fleeting images magically move across the screen. Cinema, she argues, returns us to the forgotten world of visual expression and gesture. The film "instructs its viewers in the process of rehumanizing others, both Jews and golems" (64).

In her second chapter, Barzilai explores what she terms "the golem cult of 1921 New York." Perhaps because I am not familiar with the texts covered in this chapter, I found it confusing, but nevertheless I found her research meticulous as well as judicious. First she looked at H. Leivick's *Der goylem*, a dramatic poem in eight scenes published in 1921 in New York, one year after Paul Wegener's third golem film was released. Leivick's Yiddish poem stresses the catastrophic results of golem intervention and ends in chaos and terror. She then discusses the

American framing devices that accompanied the New York Criterion Theater's long run of Wegener's third golem film. Skits, music, and narratives emphasized the film's relevance to Jewish life and helped make Jewishness less alien. Like the more typical American films *Humoresque* (1920; adapted from a Fannie Hurst short story) and *His People* (1925; written by Isadore Bernstein), Wegener's third golem film in conjunction with its framing devices at the Criterion commodified Jewishness for American as well as Jewish audiences. Lastly, Barzilai identifies two Yiddish operettas that were staged during the 1921–22 New York theater season. One still survives in manuscript in the Library of Congress: the Jewish Hungarian playwright Albert Kovessy's *Der goylem*, translated into Yiddish by Max Schweid and performed at Max Gabel's Theater in Harlem. Gabel's production avoided mystical and supernatural elements and insisted on rationality. According to Barzilai, Kovessy's and Gabel's golem is the most likable. Allowing audiences to see their experiences as immigrants in the experiences of the golem, it offered them ways to contemplate and ameliorate their sense of alienation.

Chapter 3 presents us with a challenging reversal of the golem narrative. As the consequences of the Holocaust turned into the Israeli war for independence and the new land settled into an endless pattern of violent reprisal, the familiar golem figure was used to designate Israeli enemies, in particular the Nazis and the Arabs. The Arab army was transformed into a vengeful golem created by the British, but also Jews—in the guise of “muscle Jews” or “new Jews”—turned into violent and terrifying weapons of destruction. Using S. Y. Agnon's *Ad hena*, the story of a living-dead soldier as her primary focus, Barzilai traces an intertextual history from the mysticism of Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem* (first appearing in periodical form from 1913 to 1914) to such later texts as Yoram Kaniuk's *Himmo, King of Jerusalem* (1966), which questioned the Ashkenazi military leadership's use of Sephardic men as cannon-fodder. In this

chapter the paradoxes of the golem emerge more fully. It is both vengeful demon and figure of redemption. Agnon's hero's return to his home becomes a metaphor for the return of Hebrew to its "native" land. In both cases, Barzilai argues, the resurrection is incomplete and the outcomes uncertain. The golem becomes a distressing image of the vulnerability of the Zionist project.

Chapter 4 focuses on American golems: Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Eli Roth and Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*, and James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing*. Beginning the chapter with a fascinating history of Superman's and Marvel comics' long and uneasy relationship with the golem, Barzilai sees the American golem as a figure of retribution. When discussing Chabon, she focuses on the comic book creators' golem-making rather than on the golem; Chabon, she argues, does not explore the significance of the golem figure. Given that that the "actual historical" golem both begins the story (with his dramatic rescue from Prague) and ends it (returning mysteriously as a monstrously heavy package delivered to Sam and Rosa's suburban home), I would disagree. But I still found her many insights compelling.

In Tarantino's film, the term "golem" comes to represent a psychological war tactic, and, just as Chabon's golem becomes a mediating figure between film and comics, just so does Tarantino's film underscore the link between golem-making and cinema, especially in its last scene, which represents the destruction of a movie theater full of Nazis, recalling a similar scene in Wegener's 1920 film, when the golem almost destroys the palace and kills many courtiers because they laughed at Rabbi Loew's moving images of wandering Jews. James Sturm's 2001 graphic novel brings race into the picture. While Barzilai emphasizes Sturm's attack on the false all-Americanness of baseball, his text can also be seen as critical of the baseball-playing Jews

who might—whether knowingly or unknowingly—be using the Black player to redirect the anti-Semitism that would otherwise assault them in the Southern towns where they play.

Chapter 5 turns to computers and cyborgs. As the Cold War grew into interminable global war, Norbert Wiener, who worried about the destructive power of machines, nevertheless envisioned humans ceding control to computers in his philosophical publications *Cybernetics*, *God and Golem, Inc.: A Comment on Certain Points Where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion*, and *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. On the other hand, in his novel *Golem XIV* Stanislaw Lem constructed philosophical computers who outperformed humans in every way. It was left to Marge Piercy (*He, She, and It*) and Donna Haraway (“The Cyborg Manifesto”) to dismantle the binary between machine and human altogether. I was disappointed by Barzilai’s need to point out heteronormativity in Piercy’s novel. It became for me another example of the ease with which we dismiss second-wave feminism and funnel all of its complexities into the narrow mantra of “white, middle-class, and straight.” Written in the 1980s, and presenting her readers with Chava, who prefers study to marriage; Riva and Nili, who prefer one another; and Shira, who loves the cyborg Yod who earlier slept with her grandmother, Piercy’s novel was indeed groundbreaking. Realigning sexual and gender categories was important to the story and to the period and culture from which it emerged. The novel as a whole suggests that perhaps our sexual preferences, like our gender expression and everything else about our human selves, can be programmed into us. And I would also disagree that Piercy’s narrative defends “defensive violence”; rather, I see her as wrestling with the indestructability of war and with the difficulties of writing histories without some nostalgic return to Edenic myths of paradise and painful expulsion.

Somewhat repetitious and confusing at times, almost as unwieldy as the figure of the golem itself, this book is nevertheless a treasure, containing much theoretical and biographical background, exciting and provocative close readings of verbal and visual texts, and deft and complex genealogies of golem transmissions. Barzilai seems to have delved into every known (and unknown) archive to trace her rich story of a figure who will not die and who is at once cause and consequence of the many forms of violence we commit. Tales of the golem, she reminds us again and again, enable us to define our humanity and inhumanity.

Temma Berg is Professor of English Literature at Gettysburg College. She has published books and articles on critical theory; on women writers, gender, and sexuality; and on the intricacies of archival investigation. Her recent publications include the edited collection *Women, Gender, and Print Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Memory of Betty Rizzo* (2013); “Thomas’s Rowlandson’s Vauxhall Gardens: The Lives of a Print” (2015); and “Reading Amazon Fragments: Queering Shirley” (2016). Her article on teaching about golems is part of the forthcoming MLA anthology on teaching options in Jewish American literature, edited by Roberta Rosenberg and Rachel Rubinstein.