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After the Golem: Teaching Golems, Kabbalah, Exile, Imagination, and Technological Takeover.

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Abstract

The golem is an elusive creature. From a religious perspective it enacts spirit entering matter, a creation story of potential salvation crossed with reprehensible arrogance. As a historical narrative, the golem story becomes a tale of Jewish powerlessness and oppression, of pogroms and ghettoization, of assimilation and exile, and sometimes, of renewal. As the subject of a course in women, gender and sexuality studies, the golem narrative can be seen as a relentless questioning of otherness and identity and as a revelation of the complex intersectionalities of gender, class, sexuality, race, disability, and ethnicity. As a philosophical motif, the ambiguous figure of the golem represents our human fears that we are not the autonomous individuals we believe ourselves to be. Haunted by specters of artificiality and automatism, we wonder whether we are unique individuals or inexorably programmed by social, cultural, psychological, and biological forces we are just beginning to fathom. As a Jewish story, the golem narrative illuminates the relentless history of anti-Semitism and resistance to blood libels of all sorts, hope for the future as well as despair, and most of all, the need for questioning any narrative we are given if we want to uncover its potential significances. *[excerpt]*

Keywords

Golems, Kabbalah, Artificial intelligence, Jewish History, Multidisciplinary, Identity

Disciplines

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After the Golem: Teaching Golems, Kabbalah, Exile, Imagination, and Technological Takeover

The golem is an elusive creature. From a religious perspective it enacts spirit entering matter, a creation story of potential salvation crossed with reprehensible arrogance. As a historical narrative, the golem story becomes a tale of Jewish powerlessness and oppression, of pogroms and ghettoization, of assimilation and exile, and, sometimes, of renewal. As the subject of a course in women, gender, and sexuality studies, the golem narrative can be seen as a relentless questioning of otherness and identity and as a revelation of the complex intersectionalities of gender, class, sexuality, race, disability, and ethnicity. As a philosophical motif, the ambiguous figure of the golem represents our human fears that we are not the autonomous individuals we believe ourselves to be. Haunted by specters of artificiality and automatism, we wonder whether we are unique individuals or inexorably programmed by social, cultural, psychological, and biological forces we are just beginning to fathom. As a Jewish story, the golem narrative illuminates the relentless history of anti-Semitism and resistance to blood libels of all sorts, hope for the future as well as despair, and, most of all, the need for questioning any narrative we are given if we want to uncover its potential significances.

The course The Dream of the Artificial Wo/Man: Golems and Cyborgs from Adam to *Ex Machina*[1] fulfills Gettysburg College's science, technology, and society requirement, so conversations about technology permeate the course: the class explores the possibilities of human enhancement, the ways technology transforms our lives for better and for worse, and the blurring borders between humans and their machines.

The course is designed to empower students to question rather than passively receive information. Because students are encouraged to offer unusual, even fantastic ideas, they become the primary means of bringing the unexpected into the class. Most importantly, this is an English course, and as such, it traces a reception history of the golem story. As a result, this body of Jewish literature becomes the shifting ground of a persistent, indeed universal, trope rather than simply a signifier of Jewish difference.

The Course: Texts, Themes, Topics

The course begins with "Kaddish," an episode from the 1996–97 season of the television series *The X-Files*, and two essays of Gershom Scholem, "Tradition and New Creation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists" and "The Idea of the Golem." "Kaddish" and the Scholem essays not only present the Jewish mystical tradition in radically different ways but also immediately demonstrate the mercurial quality of the golem story, which is easily adapted from a medieval morality tale to a narrative about the FBI investigation of supernatural phenomena.

The next text is Curt Leviant's 2007 edition of Yudl Rosenberg's *The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague*, which first appeared in 1909.[2] Class discussion revolves around early Jewish history, the blood libel, Kabbalah and mysticism, and the structural intricacies of Rosenberg's text. Two early films—Paul Wegener and Henrik Galeen's *The Golem: How He Came into the World* and Julien Duvivier's *Le golem*—illuminate different ways of rearranging the elements of the story, thus serving as an excellent introduction to the explanatory power of structuralism.

The class then reads texts that preceded Rosenberg's classic tale of the golem of Prague: Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Close reading of *The Tempest* provides an opportunity to investigate possible biographical connections between Shakespeare, John Dee, and the Maharal of Prague, as well as thematic connections

between the fictional Ariel, Caliban, and the Prague golem. According to legend, the Maharal, a magician rabbi, created the Prague golem in 1580; according to Benjamin Woolley, John Dee's biographer, Dee was in Prague during the 1580s. Perhaps Dee brought stories of a mythical clay creature back to England from Prague, and these stories influenced Shakespeare when he created the ethereal Ariel and the tellurian Caliban, both of whom, like the golem, must obey their master.[3]

While golem stories are often written by men and about male golems and golem makers, golem stories written by women and about female golems and golem makers enrich the genre and enable students to think about the ways texts are gendered. Issues of gender also intersect with questions of literary authority.[4] Sara Ruddick's "Maternal Thinking" is key to unraveling the complexities of the mother-daughter bond in Cynthia Ozick's "Puttermesser and Xanthippe" and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*. Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" not only inspired but also quietly permeates Piercy's novel, which raises critical questions about the blurring boundaries between animal and human, organism and machine, and physical and nonphysical in the new world of computer technology. Piercy and Haraway envision the possibilities of a cyborg world in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines and look forward to "a monstrous world without gender" (Haraway 181).

Because the course does not follow chronological order, and because the class discusses *The Tempest* and *Frankenstein* after Rosenberg's golem story, students see more clearly the extraordinary power of literary influence. They can ponder whether Mary Shelley knew about the golem story and suppose that she did. And they can imagine that Shakespeare might have used the Maharal as a prototype for Prospero,[5] just as Shelley tells us in her preface that reading German ghost stories sparked her tale of Victor Frankenstein (6).

Next students read Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem*. This work, which appeared serially from 1913 to 1914 and draws on many different sources (folkloric as well as occult), places the golem story firmly at its center. Alchemy, tarot, German expressionism, ghettoes, and the rise of modernism play an important part in class conversation. Sigmund Freud's "The 'Uncanny'" is introduced here, but the uncanny remains an important concept throughout the course, which deals with what is and is not human, what is and is not imaginary, what is repressed and returns, and the unexpected pleasures of involuntary repetition.

Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* brings in the cultural work of comic book superheroes and their close proximity to the Holocaust. The class talks about Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," crypto-Jews, and homosexuality, and the discussion touches on different film versions of *Superman*. In fall 2015, students brought in the latest *Superman* film (*Man of Steel*) as part of their group presentation and emphasized that in this cinematic iteration Superman becomes an illegal alien and thus ironizes contemporary xenophobia in the United States. The 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, which stars the Israeli Gal Gadot, raises questions about the politics of acknowledging or obscuring one's identity, a subject relevant to crypto-Judaism.[6]

Avram Davidson's "The Golem," which is set in Los Angeles, the city of make-believe, comes toward the end of the course. The funniest, most ironic, and, at six pages, shortest text on the syllabus, it brilliantly demonstrates the malleability of the golem story and picks up on almost every theme that permeates the course and its texts, especially performativity (which has been defined as the construction of identity, particularly gender, through repetitive performance) and the importance of recasting familiar narratives to realize new possibilities. Volunteers from the class act out the tale, which has, in addition to its narrator, three characters—Mr. and Mrs. Gumbeiner and a golem. "The gray-faced person" the Gumbeiners encounter could be either an angry Frankenstein-like monster, who might have escaped from a nearby University of California, Los Angeles, laboratory after attacking his creator, or an actor, who, unable to separate himself from his role, has wandered away from his studio to bring his tragic tale into the sitcom world of the Gumbeiners. Full of questions about identity, mimicry, agency, and authenticity, the story mocks both sitcom complacency and romantic excess and underscores our inability to decide, once and for all, what the golem represents. "The Golem" is a horror story, a vision of human fallibility, and a hopeful look at the possibilities that emerge if we are willing to play with the themes of the golem narrative.

Over the years, the course has concluded with different texts: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Max Barry's *Machine Man*, and E. L. Doctorow's *Andrew's Brain*. Published by *The Tablet* in 2012, Liana Finck's serial graphic novel or blog "The Modern Golem" transports the golem and his creator to contemporary New York City. Written in ten installments and using graphics superimposed on actual photographs, Finck's wry concoction brings the golem to

the world of social media. From medieval story to modern blog, the golem remains irrepressible.

Assignments

There are three assignments for this course: biweekly midrashim, a group presentation, and a research project. A midrash is textual commentary, usually biblical, that emphasizes dialectical disputation and creative interpretation. Working in pairs, students write seven midrashim over the course of the semester. Students are encouraged to be adventurous, playful, and outrageous as they make connections. Inevitably, as the course proceeds, interconnections proliferate.

Students organize themselves into presentation groups to work on one of five topics: intertextuality and influence (using Shelley's work and *Frankenstein* films); alchemy, German expressionism, and modernism (using work by Meyrink, Wegener and Galeen, and Duvivier); computers, artificial intelligence, and human-robot relations (using work by Piercy and by Haraway); comic books, the business of artistic reproduction, and artistic authenticity (using work by Chabon, work by Benjamin, and *Superman* films); and bioethics and transhumanism (using work by either Atwood, Ishiguro, Barry, or Doctorow as well as *Ex Machina* and the proliferation of online videos and Web sites describing and selling technological enhancements). Group presenters determine the particular direction of their hour-long presentation. This course tends to attract more English majors than students in any other major, but science majors form an important minority that enriches the scientific and technological content in presentations as well as in the course as a whole. In an early iteration of the course, a computer science major explained how computers create a fourth dimension; in later iterations, a biology major researched the science in *Frankenstein* and in Shelley's early-nineteenth-century world, and a chemistry major explained the continuities and discontinuities between alchemy and chemistry; he even produced small amounts of gold in class.

The final assignment is the research project, which can further develop ideas explored in the midrashim or group presentations, though students often prefer to pursue something new. One science major, Luke, wrote a moving paper about the need for scientists to read literary texts about scientists, so they might see themselves as others see them. He analyzed Frankenstein and other fictional scientists and explained his literary analysis this way:

> I decided to take the approach of reviving the golem, putting my spirit into the body of the text and seeing how my own literary interpretation would behave once it was there. I'm not used to the technique of using one's humanity, one's subjectivity, to analyze a subject; however, after gathering a better understanding of the similarities between science and the humanities, it seems extraordinarily appropriate.

By identifying with the golem, Luke was, paradoxically, able to get in touch with his human subjectivity. In science classes, he saw himself as drawing upon his objectivity and saw science as completely different from the humanities. But by using his imagination he better understood the similarities between science and the humanities and the importance of subjectivity. Another student looked at Greek artificial humans and compared them to golems; a third explored Karel Čapek's robots and the way processes of "identity differentiation" otherize and separate humans from mechanical beings and golems.

Mel, a student who wanted to hone their creative writing skills, decided to write a golem story.[7] They wrote a tale of an android named Sephi. The story ends with Sephi's response to Disney's *Pinocchio*, in which he expresses the hope that his maker was more like Geppetto than Frankenstein:

> "I'm considering the plausibility that my maker was a misguided Geppetto. Do you think they miss me?" Sephi looks to Michael for an answer, assuming he has some insight into the psyche of madness and heart that must have rendered Sephi so finely. The questions knock words from Michael, scatter them so he's mute. Sephi carries on, voicing his quandaries. "I have always assumed my maker was a Victor Frankenstein figure, and I an abandoned monster. This movie offers an unforeseen alternative. Maybe I was a wish."
>
> Sephi looks down at his hands, neck bare of any slack strings to let his head hang so low and fast.
>
> "Sephi," Michael finally manages, saying his name before he has anything else in his throat. "Sephi." He reaches out, empty-handed.

Michael's empty-handedness is an eloquent reminder of how much is always left out of any reading of a text, whether that text is our own lives or a written text that helps us understand the trajectory and significance of our lives. Michael does not hold any strings, nor does the author or the reader. We seek out meanings, find them, feel dissatisfied, then seek out other meanings. The analysis is interminable, at once exhilarating and disorienting.

Golem Theory

In recent years, several important monographs have been published that deepen our thinking about the haunting figure of the golem. Cathy S. Gelbin's *The Golem Returns: From German Romantic Literature to Global Jewish Culture, 1801–2008* explores the golem myth as it draws on and influences German literary history and, through its various transformations, changes attitudes toward Jewish difference. Elizabeth R. Baer's *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction* stresses the golem story's permeability, instability, and the need for revision over time. The most recent theoretical text about the golem, Maya Barzilai's *Golem: Modern Wars and Their Monsters*, explores the golem as a representation of our ongoing fascination, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with war and its technological and human weapons. Born out of the crucible of World War I, with its clay trenches and devastating technologies, the modern and postmodern golem repeatedly enacts the horrors of war and conscription, of men being made into obedient soldiers.

All three theoretical texts, as indeed all golem stories, speak to the inextricable intertwining of violence and creation. But in that persistent braiding, the golem story offers redemption. Whether we see golem stories as evolving indicators of Jewish cultural authenticity (Gelbin), as an endlessly proliferating palimpsest of Jewish history (Baer), or as meditations on the horrors of weapons of mass destruction (Barzilai), they are also always a figuring forth of the creative powers of the imagination. Like Jewishness itself, the golem story seems indestructible. It returns despite being repressed. It might be buried for a time but eventually it reemerges with even greater force. A canny legend, it tells us who we are and who we are not, what we can and what we cannot do. It offers us many different alternatives. Alive with promise, it offers us hope.

Notes

1. Over the years, the title of the course has changed to include different contemporary films: *Superman*, *Blade Runner*, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, and, most recently, *Ex Machina*.

2. I was not able to use this work until the 2008 iteration of the course. In earlier versions of the course I used Gershon Winkler's *The Golem of Prague*.

3. See Woolley, 219–33.

4. A very useful text for this part of the course is Charles E. Robinson's two-volume edition of *The Frankenstein Notebooks*, which examines who wrote and

revised what parts of *Frankenstein* and how the partnership between Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley might have evolved.

5. Eventually I was forced to discard *The Tempest* as a teaching text (there are always difficult choices to make when constructing syllabi), but the story of the Maharal and his possible connection to Prospero remain a part of the course.

6. I owe this insight to Mel, a student whose work is more fully discussed later in this essay.

7. Luke and Mel are pseudonyms for the students whose work I have included. They enthusiastically gave me permission to use their words.

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