

THE GOLEM SPEAKS:
A STUDY OF FOUR MODERN JEWISH AMERICAN NOVELS

By

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PREFACE

I first became interested in the golem through my long-term membership in the Winston-Salem Temple Emanuel Sisterhood Book Club. The books we choose each month must be somehow Jewish; other than that, our choices have been rather eclectic. But, strangely, I found that many of our books suddenly seemed to feature golems. I began to sense a pattern. In what way were these writers using this ancient legend, and why?

Then I took Dr. Neal Walls' "Creation Myths" MALS class. For a paper topic, I decided to investigate the golem, initially thinking of it as simply another form of artificial creation, much like that described in *Frankenstein*, and having no idea of the richness of the story. I was fascinated.

In the course of my research for that paper, I contacted Rabbi Mark Strauss-Cohn of Temple Emanuel of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He simply laughed when I asked him about the golem. He said he wasn't even forty and so was not yet able to know enough. This echoes the idea that to study the mysteries of creation, one must be a *tzaddik*, a wise man, which requires that one be over forty. When I asked him about the function of the golem in Jewish mysticism, he suggested that it was hope. In a sense, the golem is a medieval, magical "Superman," responding to the desperate need of so many of the Jewish

communities of medieval Eastern Europe. The rabbi also mentioned that the Kabbalah and the golem stories arose in those areas of Europe less affected by the growing rationalism of the late Middle Ages. He said that in the stories of Noah and the Tower of Babel, God gives humanity a warning not to go too far. We cannot emulate the creative powers of God. So, in reference to the modern usage of the golem motif, he said that the golem serves as a symbol of both hope and warning within the Jewish community, echoing the message of Genesis.

To complete my MALS coursework, and because I found the course description engrossing, I enrolled in Dr. Michael Stryck's "Twins and Doubles" class; I found him to be as interested in the golem legend as I—and knowledgeable as well. So I now had both my thesis topic and my advisor.

When Michael Chabon, author of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, was in Winston-Salem for a book signing, I was able to ask him what he thought about the current use of the golem. He said that while past Jewish novelists tended to avoid the use of Jewish folklore, perhaps as a way of denying Jewish heritage, current writers embrace it. That would explain some of the popularity of the golem figure.

So I thank all of these people for helping me to find such a fascinating topic and guiding my reading and research. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Stryck; he has been an excellent advisor, and I

very much appreciate his guidance and wisdom. Dr. Walls and Dr. Charles Richman graciously agreed to serve on my committee, and I am grateful for that. Sometimes this thesis itself has seemed like a golem—brought into creation by words, with the best of intentions, but occasionally out of control.

ABSTRACT

Frances Wilke Tytell

THE GOLEM IN CONTEMPORARY JEWISH AMERICAN FICTION

Thesis under the direction of Michael Stryck, Ph.D.

The golem is a figure of Jewish folklore, an artificial person—usually, although not always, male—created using the magic of the Kabbalah. The legend has evolved over millennia; its earliest versions have golems created for no practical purpose other than part of a magical quest to achieve communion with God. The second phase, best known through the stories of Rabbi Loew of Prague, features a golem created for practical purposes, often to be a savior of innocent people. The third phase shows a more malevolent creature, as the golem ultimately evades the control of its creator.

A study of the golem figure in four modern Jewish novels suggests that a fourth phase is developing, with the golem becoming a metaphor for the artist's creativity. The artist may utilize the genuine magic of art—words—to repair a broken world, fulfilling the Jewish commandment of *tikkun olam*. This goes beyond the novelist as well, for today's scientists can also be seen as Kabbalists, creating their golems. In this way not only can the golem be seen as a metaphor for our times, the legend itself becomes its own golem.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Ancient and medieval legends describe golem-creation as a way in which humanity can share in the divine creativity of God. The legend of the golem has evolved over millennia, changing in accordance with the needs of the Jewish community. In America, the golem has recently found new life and is making another evolutionary step that tells us more than just the legend itself; it also speaks of the changing character of contemporary Jewish literature in America.

The Jewish legend has, in fact, become a familiar motif in modern Jewish American fiction. Why would so many authors use this figure of Jewish folklore? Clearly the golem's function is a trope for rescue and hope, suggesting a change from the more angst-ridden protagonists seen in earlier Jewish American fiction. Furthermore, it suggests a new degree of comfort with the concept of Jewishness. While earlier writers were often uncomfortable with their ethnicity and religion, these more contemporary novelists are embracing elements of their Jewish past to convey deeper ideas.

The Novels

Four significant modern American writers—Cynthia Ozick in *The Puttermesser Papers: A Novel* (1998, preceded by the golem story “Puttermesser and Xanthippe” in 1982), Marge Piercy in *He, She, and It* (1991), Pete Hamill in *Snow in August* (1997), and Michael Chabon in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000)—draw on the golem legend as a basis of their work and demonstrate elements of the legend’s various stages of evolution.

The golem legend is the frame of Piercy’s novel, while Hamill, a non-Jew, uses it as a modern *deus ex machina*—at the last minute, the golem comes to save the day! Ozick’s female golem is created by accident and, like golems of old, comes to the rescue of the community. When she grows out of the control of her creator, she must be de-activated. Chabon’s golem is both a plot device and an extended metaphor for escape. Chabon’s Josef thinks:

The shaping of a golem . . . was a gesture of hope . . . in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words and an artful hand might produce something . . . exempt from the crushing strictures, from the ills, cruelties, and inevitable failures of the greater Creation.
(582)

Josef suggests that the golem allows one “to slip . . . free of the entangling chain of reality and the straitjacket of physical laws” (582). The golem, then, can serve a variety of functions—but why use it all?

Other Tropes

Clearly, there is a Holocaust connection—the golem did not help the Jews when they so sorely needed the help. Why? Rabbi Hirsch, of Pete Hamill’s *Snow in August*, speaks to this directly. The rabbi had tried but failed to re-animate the golem, and so could not save his beloved wife, Leah. He tries to explain his failure, saying that he “did not believe enough. Maybe, God I did not love enough” (380). If the golem of legend is a protector of the Jews, to be created or animated when the community is in peril, then why did it fail the Jews during the Holocaust?

Emily Bilski, in “The Art of the Golem,” explains the connection of the golem motif and the Holocaust, suggesting that the legend serves as a survival myth for an oppressed people (47). She argues that the golem motif “can be understood as a collective fantasy of Jews wielding power” (47). But such a fantasy may violate ethical principles within Judaism, suggesting that violence is the only response to victimization. While the Holocaust connection is clearly significant, it is a different and complex study, and so will be touched on only tangentially in this study.

The golem legend is also an excellent metaphor for ethical dilemmas facing modern science. In some ways, the mysteries of the

human genome project are not so different from those of the Kabbalah, nor are scientists that different from the Kabbalists of old. Marge Piercy, in *He, She, and It*, most clearly develops these ethical issues.

Thematically, her warning is the same as Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem's: golem making is dangerous. Ozick, Chabon, and Hamill have other themes in mind, but they all draw on facets of the golem legend.

Major Scholars

In his essay "The Idea of the Golem," Gershom Scholem argues that the person who "creates a golem is in some sense competing with God's creation of Adam; in such an act the creative power of man enters into a relationship, whether of emulation or antagonism, with the creative power of God" (159). "Golem-making is dangerous," he concludes. "[L]ike all major creation it endangers the life of the creator. The source of danger, however, is not the golem . . . but the man himself" (190).

In his comprehensive and scholarly study of the golem legends, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (1990), Moshe Idel seeks to enhance Scholem's view of the Jewish roots of the golem legend, arguing that "part of the Golem traditions [should] be envisioned as the result of the encounter of Jewish mystical and magical traditions with other types of cultures, which fertilized Jewish thought . . . and produced a variety of understandings of the nature of the Golem" (xxii).

In her introduction to the Golem Exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York (1988), *Golem! Danger, Deliverance, and Art*, Emily Bilski, in collaboration with Moshe Idel and Isaac Bashevis Singer, offers an artistic and historical overview of the legend.

In his study of the biotechnical implications of the golem legend, *Golems Among Us: How a Jewish Legend Can Help Us Navigate the Biotech Century*, Byron L. Sherwin argues that the legend can aid us in understanding the ethical dilemmas of social and biological engineering.

The Stages of the Golem Legend

As the golem legend has developed, the creature itself has become more malevolent. Scholem says that “[t]he golem legend is dynamic, not static. The dangerous golem of later legends represents a profound transformation” (191) from an earlier view of the golem. The most ancient stories show such creation as having no practical purpose at all; rather, it was a form of sharing God’s creative powers. A second stage developed during the Middle Ages, of which the story of Rabbi Loew of Prague is characteristic. A third development in the legend began in the late-nineteenth century, in which the golem becomes malevolent, wreaks havoc, runs amok (as they always say), finally destroying both itself and its creator. Sherwin suggests that this view is more like “a facsimile of Frankenstein’s creature” (66) than representative of Jewish folklore. This view is also currently seen in the way the golem is portrayed in video role-playing games, always a monster of some sort.

And so the golem novels keep coming—a plethora utilizes the golem motif. Nomi Eve's *The Family Orchard* (2000), Thane Rosenbaum's *The Golems of Gotham* (2002), Frances Sherwood's *The Book of Splendor* (2002), and Ben Schrank's *Consent* (2003) all feature golems. This phenomenon reinforces the idea that the golem legend satisfies a contemporary literary focus.

A fourth stage of the legend is clearly developing, as so many artists are now using the golem as a metaphor for artistic creativity. Singer recognizes this connection in the Foreword to Emily Bilski's *Golem! Danger, Deliverance, and Art*, suggesting that “writers felt in the legend of the golem a profound kinship to artistic creativity. Each work of art has the element of a miracle . . . so the golem-maker [is], essentially, an artist” (7). Michael Chabon, in his essay “The Writing Life,” elaborates upon this, saying that the writer, like the golem-maker, creates life through his characters. The writer must recognize the danger to himself, but he is “eager to show his powers, to celebrate his mastery, to bring into being a little world that, like God's, is at once terribly imperfect and filled with astonishing life” (“Writing” X06).

This new development in the legend suggests that creators can be seen as golem-makers, whether they be scientists or artists; their creations—narratives, stem-cells, or even the legend itself—are their “golems.” These artists are the Kabbalists of the future. Through their skill—art or science—they have the potential to “repair the world,” to

perform the Jewish commandment of *tikkun olam*, since God's creation is incomplete.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORY OF THE GOLEM LEGENDS

To understand the evolution of the golem legends, we must first look at the story of creation in the Torah. From there we can discuss these legends, which can be organized into three phases. In the first, a golem is created as part of a “mystical and magical quest to achieve communion with God and to share in the creative rapture that God experienced when creating the world” (Sherwin 45). The second phase consists of medieval legends, such as that of the golem of Prague. In these stories the golem is created for a specific purpose, to be a servant or to protect the community. Its power, however, is easily controlled. In the third phase, often seen now in video and role-playing games, the golem is essentially a malevolent creature, more like Frankenstein’s monster than the helpful, if mute and clumsy, golem of Prague. The writers to be discussed in this study suggest that a fourth phase is developing, one that answers the initial question: why the golem?

The Biblical Story of Creation

According to Genesis, the actual creation was done through speech—“God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light” (Gen. 1.1). It was through language that God brought forth the light, the firmament, the waters and the dry land, the separation of light and dark, and living

creatures. Finally, seeing that all was good, God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1.26), and so “in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1.27). The implication here is that God physically made them “male and female,” rather than creating them by means of language alone. So we see that humanity is fashioned through the actual matter that God had already created with language.

Current Biblical scholarship suggests that the Torah was first written by at least four authors, including the “J” author (“J” standing for Jehovah, or Yahweh). In *The Book of J*, the “J” or Yahwistic writer presents God as a universal god rather than a local deity, leading to the concept of monotheism and accentuating the power of creation. David Rosenberg’s translation of the J narrative articulates the actual means by which God created humankind: “Yahweh shaped an earthling from clay of this earth [and] blew into its nostrils the wind of life” (*Book of J* 62); the Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates this as “then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen. 2.7). Genesis 4.1 emphasizes the act of creation as well: “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD.’” Rosenberg’s translation of this passage also emphasizes the act of creation: “Now the man knew Hava, his wife, in the flesh; she conceived Cain: ‘I have created a man as Yahweh has,’ she said

when he was born” (*Book of J* 65). Since even sexual procreation is recognized as imitating God’s creative powers, it follows that humanity has been given the ability to create, emulating God’s pattern.

The Hebrew Bible does not specifically refer to golems at all. David Wisniewski, appending “A Note” at the end of *Golem*, a Caldecott Award-winning children’s version of the story, explains that the rabbis interpreted Psalms 139:16—“Thine eyes did see my *substance*, yet being imperfect”—to imply golem-making, since the Hebrew word for *shapeless mass* is *golem*. The word *substance*, according to the Talmud, means anything imperfect or incomplete (n.p.). Therefore Adam, prior to having the breath of life, was a body without a soul and so a golem. This idea was used by the rabbis to suggest that Adam, or man—God’s golem, the first human, but without the breath of life, or *nefesh*—is something unformed and imperfect. The following *midrash*, explaining the first twelve hours of Adam’s life, occurs in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 38b): “The day had twelve hours. In the first hour the earth was piled up; in the second he became a golem, a still unformed mass; in the third his limbs were stretched out; in the fourth the soul was cast into him” (qtd. in Scholem 161). This explains that since Adam was imperfect, unformed, a shapeless mass, incomplete, he was therefore a “golem.”

The Evolution of the Legend: Phase One

Isaac Bashevis Singer, the 1978 Nobel Laureate, in his article “The Golem is a Myth for Our Time,” (later reprinted as the Foreword to Bilski’s book), explains that according to Kabbalist tradition, The Book of Creation, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, was actually written by the Patriarch Abraham, who then transmitted it to his son Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, Jacob to Joseph, and so on through the generations. Since God used specific combinations of Hebrew letters leading to the *Tetragrammaton*, the Ineffable Name, *Ha-Shem* or YHVH (Yahweh), יהוה, to create the universe, we can use the same letters to animate inert matter and so be endowed with God’s holy power of creation (Singer 6). Scholem notes, however, that while the actual origins of this enigmatic text are unknown, it probably was written sometime between the third and sixth centuries C.E (167).

According to the *Sefer Yetzirah*, golem-making was primarily mystical, done only to achieve a form of ecstatic communion with God. Scholem says that such creation had little practical purpose other than “to demonstrate the adept’s ‘rank’ as a creator” (173). Chabon explains that “the ritual itself was the point of the exercise; performing it . . . would induce a kind of ecstatic state, as the adept assumed a privilege ordinarily reserved for God alone” (“Writing” X06). John D. Loike, in “Is a Human Clone a Golem?” says that creation using the *Sefer Yezirah* would

actually have been a *mitzvah*, even “a form of prayer” (237). He cites Rabbi Loew of Prague as saying that “meditations on the Divine Names contained in *Sefer Yezirah* are like any other kind of prayer” (237). Only later did practical considerations, such as the need for a servant or protection of the community, add to the legend.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* explains God’s formation of the universe, including the construction of the world and the cosmos, by means of the *sefiroth*, “the realm of divine emanations . . . [through which] . . . God’s creative power unfolds,” as Scholem tells us (35). “Insofar as God reveals himself, He does so through the creative power of the *sefiroth*” (35) and the Hebrew alphabet. According to the Kabbalists, various combinations of the *sefiroth* and the Divine Name, the *Tetragrammaton*, form the structure of all things. J. Lawton Winstlade, in “Techno-Kabbalah,” elaborates upon this, saying that this small book—some 1,300 words in the shortest of four extant versions—“contains the secrets of the universe encoded within the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet” (88). Theoretically, then, those who understand these secrets may apply them to their own creative ends. To do so, however, is the product of at least forty years of concentrated study.

The earliest written story of a golem comes from the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 65b). Rava said: “If the righteous wished, they could create a world, for it is written: ‘Your inequities have separated between you and your God.’ The implication [of this passage] is that if a man is

saintly without sins, his creative power is no longer 'separated' from that of God" (qtd. in Scholem 166). The Talmud even suggests that a sort of "laboratory" existed among the early rabbis: "Rav Hanina and Rav Oshay busied themselves on the eve of every Sabbath with the *Book of Creation*. . . . They made a calf one-third the natural size and ate it" (Berakhoth 55a, qtd. in Scholem 166).

Moshe Idel, in *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, says that this was understood as "a test-case for someone's righteousness" (31), and its significance was to "show that even the pietists are not able to create a speaking creature" (31).

Although the "magical power of the righteous is extraordinary . . . Rava himself could not create a creature able to speak," Bilski reminds us (17).

The Sanhedrin text emphasizes the inability of the artificial man to speak, presumably because of some inequity on the part of its creator.

The Talmudic commentators agreed, Sherwin explains, that "Rava's golem was flawed [being unable to speak] because Rava was morally flawed. . . . But they debated the issue of whether someone more upright and skilled than Rava might have been able to create a golem that could become human in all respects" (14).

The Evolution of the Legend: Phase Two

During the sixteenth century, the persecution of European Jews had increased; following their expulsion from Spain in 1492, country after country denounced them. Even Bohemia—formerly a safe refuge—

was no longer secure. The “blood libel” once again surfaced—the accusation that the Jews needed the blood of a Christian child in their Passover matzo. The Jewish community needed help. What better than an “artificial anthropoid”? In this way, the basic theme of golem creation shifted from ecstatic communion with God to a justification for vengeance against persecutors.

The best known of these stories—there are many—is that of Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1525-1609), known as the Maharal. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that various facets of the golem legend and Rabbi Loew became fused, however. Sherwin notes that “Judah Loew and his golem became inseparable” because they were “locked together forever by the web of folklore” (22).

Besides the folkloric tale that has become attached to him, Rabbi Loew was a venerable sixteenth-century Kabbalist, scholar, and mathematician. Loew suggested that humanity is actually God’s partner in creation, since God arrested the process of creation before its completion. He said, “Human beings bring to fruition things not previously found in nature; nonetheless, since these are activities that occur in nature, it is as if they entered the world to be created” (qtd. in Sherwin 12).

Although many story-tellers have emphasized various facets of Loew’s life and work, certain facts do remain consistent. Judah Loew was the chief rabbi of Prague in the sixteenth century, when Rudolf II was the

Habsburg ruler. The emperor was apparently interested in magic, science, alchemy, and—oddly—Kabbalah, including the *Sefer Yetzirah*. According to Sherwin, meetings between Rudolf and Rabbi Loew can be historically verified (20), but the legends differ on the nature of their relationship. He argues that this meeting, as well as Loew’s already-established wonder-working reputation, eventually led to the fusing of various golem legends with the Rabbi of Prague (21).

The medieval golem legends all conclude, as Lester D. Friedman argues in “The Edge of Knowledge: Jews as Monsters/Jews as Victims,” with the Jews destroying their own creations before they become unmanageable. These rabbis—including Loew—used their powers wisely, realizing “that moral responsibility begins, not ends, with creation, and [so] they destroyed their creatures when they threatened to roam beyond their makers’ control” (54).

Singer retells the medieval legend in his classic children’s story, *The Golem* (1982), dedicated to “to the persecuted and oppressed everywhere” (n. p.). Singer’s rabbi is called “Lieb,” however, although both “Lieb” and “Loew” mean “lion.” Rabbi Lieb (Loew) is described as a “truly holy man,” a *tzaddik*. When the Jewish community is threatened by the blood libel, the rabbi is visited by a wanderer, “possibly one of the thirty-six hidden saints through whose merit the world existed, according to tradition” (20). The visitor tells the good rabbi to create a golem, using the powers of the Kabbalah, but only to help the Jews (23). Since,

according to legend, “only the most saintly rabbis were given this power and only after many days of supplication” (25), the rabbi was astonished. He did as instructed, forming clay into human shape and engraving on its forehead the three Hebrew letters that spell *emet*, truth (*aleph*, *mem*, *tav*)—but, for the moment, leaving off the *aleph*, required to animate the figure. Without the *aleph*, the Hebrew letters *mem* and *tav* spell *met*, meaning “death.” He called his golem “Joseph.”

Rabbi Lieb (Loew) maintained control of the golem by periodically erasing the *aleph*, activating the creature only when the Jewish community needed protection. The emperor, aware of the power of the golem, quizzed the rabbi, saying that with the golem Jews could conquer the world. Rabbi Lieb (Loew) answered by saying, “The golem is only a temporary help to us in a time of exceptional danger” (52), suggesting that the golem would only live as long as necessary.

Because the golem was so large and powerful, the rabbi’s wife wanted to use its supernatural powers. Her request was meant charitably; it was not selfish in any way. However, this was not the purpose for which the golem was created. Under duress, the rabbi agreed to her demands. Having done this—a misuse of the magic that created it—the rabbi lost his authority over the golem, who then began to develop a will of its own. As the golem became less controllable, it also became more human—and more Jewish, even wanting a *bar mitzvah*. Its language usage also developed; although it had not been mute, its

speech was that of a small child. Ultimately, using his daughter Miriam, the rabbi tricked the golem into bending over, and so was able to erase the *aleph* from the golem's forehead, effectively de-activating it.

Singer's story embraces most of the folkloric elements of the golem story characteristic of the second phase of the legend—a powerful rabbi creating a mute and obedient golem to protect the Jewish community, who then grows out of control in some way and must be destroyed by its own creator. The golem of this stage was not malevolent—large and clumsy, perhaps, but still ultimately controllable. Its creator's intentions were beneficent as well, an important point in the development of the legend.

The Evolution of the Legend: Phase Three

A new attribute began to appear in the golem legends in the early-twentieth century—actual violence, vengeance, and even malevolence. These later golems were often uncontrollable, even evil. Sometimes they were more clearly doubles of their creators, implying that enemies are both external and internal, within the self. In fact, Sherwin argues that these golems have become a symbol for the darkness not only of the creator but of humanity (44).

Gustav Meyrink's *The Golem*, published in 1915, presents a surrealistic, expressionistic, almost dream-like view of the golem, but one quite different from earlier golems, suggesting the beginnings of the third phase of the legend. In this novel the golem figure itself functions as a

double, a way to access those areas of the mind inaccessible to normal consciousness. “Assume the man who came to you and whom you call the Golem signifies the awakening of the dead through your innermost spiritual life” (83), says Pernath (the narrator, who will turn out to be the golem itself). Scholem states that Meyrink’s spooky golem is the “materialized . . . collective soul of the ghetto” (159). His view echoes the idea of the golem not only as the shadow of its creator, but in this case of the Jewish people themselves—certainly a dark view.

Other significant events include the production of Paul Wegener’s classic film *The Golem (Der Golem)* in 1920, which repeats the story of Rabbi Loew, although in this film his golem is almost uncontrollable. When the rabbi’s assistant takes control, the now-lumbering monster abducts the rabbi’s daughter. Again, magic has been misused, and we continue to see the danger of golem-creation.

In “Picture Books about the Golem: Acts of Creation Without and Within,” Amy Sonheim observes that “at the beginning of the twentieth century the specific use of retaliation was added” (378). While this repeats parts of the medieval view of the golem—a stage in golem-making in which the figure becomes dangerous after having performed the service for which it was created—the story has continued to evolve as the golem itself has become more malevolent. Prior to this development it had not been evil, although it often was big, clumsy, and hard to control.

In fact, outside of Jewish-based literature, the golem is now typically a dangerous monster-type figure, as seen in various internet and role-playing games. It even appeared in an episode of the television series *The X-Files* entitled “Kaddish” (1977), which Michael J. Koven, in “Have I Got a Monster for You: Some Thoughts on the Golem, *The X-Files*, and the Jewish Horror Movie,” says is within the tradition of the golem legends. The creature is fashioned out of mud, animated by the inscription of *emet*, brought into being to attack the white supremacists of the community, and finally destroyed just before it turns on the community (220). Winslade concurs, saying that the show’s golem, “an abomination born out of language . . . [is] . . . a fitting example of a highly disseminated media golem” (85). All of these stories show the dynamism of the legend.

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*

Because it is so often referenced, some attention needs to be given to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The monster, created by the demented scientist Victor Frankenstein in a burst of hubris, is indeed a golem, though hardly what the rabbis would have predicted. Would the eighteen-year-old Shelley have known the medieval legends of the golem? Frankenstein’s infatuation with alchemy as a young man might support such a theory. But whether or not she was aware of the legend, her

monster is a golem, if by definition that means a “shapeless mass” brought to life in a godless manner.

More to the point is her theme, which echoes the medieval legends: what are the limits of humanity’s powers of creation? And what must the intentions of the creator be? When Rabbi Loew uses his golem for reasons other than those for which it was created, he loses control and so his golem threatens the community. Frankenstein also misuses his powers of creation. Although he claims that his intention is “to banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death” (42)—perhaps an altruistic motive—he adds “what glory would attend the discovery” (42) and “[a] new species would bless me as its creator” (55). Frankenstein is not perfecting the world, but seeking knowledge itself, the “intoxicating draught” (29), thereby taking on an almost god-like role.

Shelley’s monster, like the golems of the third phase, definitely becomes malevolent, but only after being abandoned by its creator; it is also highly articulate, whereas the Jewish golem usually is mute. Thematically, this echoes the function of the golem’s relationship to language. While words bring the Jewish golem to life, Frankenstein’s golem presumably is brought to life by galvanism. The monster does understand language altogether too well, having learned it from John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Since, according to the Kabbalists, God used language to create humanity, a golem’s inability to speak is what makes

it less than human, implying some iniquity on the part of the creator. As we have seen, Rava himself could not create a speaking golem. The monster's language, however, is highly sophisticated. Since the possession of language is so closely akin to being fully human, Shelley's "hideous progeny" (10) must also be human. This certainly blurs the line between what is human and what is not, a theme particularly emphasized by Marge Piercy's Yod, the cyborg, as we will see.

Repairing the World—the Artist as Golem-Maker: Phase Four

The Talmudic rabbis understood that the world was incomplete. According to Sherwin, they interpreted Genesis 2.3 to imply that the world was "created to be made" (54). The Revised Standard Version of Genesis says, "God rested from all his work which he had done in creation" (Gen. 2.3), suggesting that creation is not yet finished. The implication is that while the raw materials of the earth were created by God, humanity is required to continue the work God initiated. Judah Loew explained this, writing, "Everything that God created requires repair and completion" (qtd. in Sherwin 53).

This new phase of golem-making, seen in so many of these modern novels, follows this thread. The golem-maker must improve upon and attempt to complete God's work in creation, although the process is unending. Thus the artist, as a golem-maker, has the obligation, through the power of narrative, to make the world better. The golem figure offers an appropriate metaphor for this task.

CHAPTER THREE

MARGE PIERCY: *HE, SHE, AND IT*

Marge Piercy's dystopian vision in *He, She, and It* combines the ancient mysticism of the Kabbalah with the most advanced methods of artificial creation. The novel seems taken directly from Singer's retelling of the Rabbi Loew legend. In fact, early in the novel Piercy sets up the parallel between Yod, a cyborg, and Joseph, Singer's golem. Her horrifying novel integrates additional elements into the legend by questioning the ethics of creating a new type of "artificial anthropoid" in the cyborg, while adding a distinctive feminist twist.

Malkah, the cyborg's programmer, says to Yod, "For a human being to make another is to usurp the power of *ha-Shem* [God; see Glossary] . . . it is dangerous to the soul, dangerous to the world" (29), thus foreshadowing Yod's "death" and echoing Scholem's warning about the dangers of golem-making. Calling herself both an artist and a scientist, Malkah recognizes the connection between science and art—her creation, her golem, although a cyborg, is also the product of her artistic vision.

By telling Rabbi Loew's story to Yod as part of his programming, Malkah makes clear the novel's parallel between Singer's Joseph and Yod; both are golems, both have human creators, both serve their

purpose of saving the community, both succumb to violence, both fall in love with humans, and both must ultimately be destroyed because they are too dangerous. Both show human characteristics, although they are not human. A twenty-first century cyborg is really not much different from a sixteenth-century golem, Piercy suggests, thus using Singer's version of the golem legend to warn of future issues regarding the possibilities of science. William A. Covino, in "Grammars of Transgression: Golems, Cyborgs, and Mutants," supports this, arguing that "as a hybrid of human and machine, the cyborg is a reinvention of the partnership of adept and golem and, as such, conforms to characteristics of its predecessor" (371), the golem of Prague.

The Novel

The comfortable life of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries has ended with war, famine, and environmental disaster. Political units are no longer based on geography; rather, industrial enclaves dominate the ex-United States, with the majority of citizens living in the "Glop," the former Boston-New York-Atlanta corridor. The air is poisoned, as is much of the food supply. The elite few live in either free towns—remnants of an earlier time—or within protected corporate colonies. This grim world is the result of devastating war and famine, and, for the most part, subsists on the trash of the previous century. Free areas do exist, such as Tikva, a Jewish community located somewhere along the former east coast. They need to be protected from

both the Web—a futuristic variant on our current World Wide Web—and the environmental disaster that was a result of twentieth-century policy. Such is the world of Piercy's *He, She, and It*—a science-fiction horror story, yet one that encompasses and uses the ancient story of the golem as a trope for the issue of creation. These creations, cyborgs, may not necessarily be “alive” or even human—but they still are, in a sense, persons, as we will see. Piercy's terrifying vision, consistent with the fourth stage of the legend's development, uses the golem legend to warn us of the perils of both modern science and corporate development, thereby offering a way for us to improve our world—or at least to prevent its destruction.

The malevolent world of the corporate enclave is gradually revealed as the novel's protagonist, Shira, loses both her son and her marriage to these powers. She is a low-level employee of a large corporation who apparently holds some fascination for its upper echelons, although the reason for this is unclear until the end of the novel. She has no choice but to return to Tikva, the Jewish free town of her youth—one of the few remaining bastions of freedom and order in this appalling world—and to Malkah, her grandmother and the woman who raised her. Malkah is not only a maternal figure but a computer genius responsible for much of Tikva's productivity and connection to the outside world. She is also probably Piercy's voice.

In Tikva, Shira meets an unusual figure aptly named Yod, one of the final letters of the Hebrew alphabet, as well as part of the *Tetragrammaton* which, if recited properly, allows the creation of a golem. He/It (hence the title of the book) is an illegal cyborg, an “artificial anthropoid.” A sensitive, intuitive, and gentle “man,” he is everything she could want in a lover—but he is not human. He is a machine, or more specifically a cyborg, a cross between human and machine. Avram, a scientist set on protecting the community from organ pirates and the incursions (through the Web) of assorted corporate bad guys, has created “him.” Tikva has managed to survive such corporate onslaughts, primarily because it has retained control of its perimeter and has maintained independence from the outside world.

As discussed above, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the original Book of Creation, was, according to Kabbalistic legend, written by the patriarch Abraham; this new Abraham—Avram—is now writing a new Book of Creation in his laboratory notebooks. The “ineffable words” are encoded on the memory crystal that creates and animates Yod. Piercy’s suggestion is that the new and old creations of the Kabbalists are not so different.

The novel alternates between first- and third-person narration, although the narrative present is the mid-twenty-first century. Since the grandmother, Malkah, was raised in a traditional Jewish home prior to the devastation, she becomes the storyteller, the bard who transmits the

culture. She says, “Once upon a time is how stories begin. Half artist, half scientist, I know that much” (17), as she tells Yod the story with which she grew up, that of the golem. Malkah even cites the pre-eminent scholar of Jewish mysticism: “[I am] a woman who spends her working days creating fictions and monsters. . . . I believe in the truth of what is perhaps figurative, although Moshe Idel has found recipe after recipe . . . for making golems” (25). Yod’s status as a golem is clearly established at this point.

Alternating between the grim world of the present and the equally terrifying world of sixteenth-century Prague, the novel makes it clear that Yod, the cyborg—a “cybernetic organism,” defined by Donna Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto” as “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (149)—is also a golem. This makes both Avram and, more indirectly, Malkah equivalent to Rabbi Loew. They are creators of an “artificial anthropoid,” a modern golem. Covino suggests that Piercy “sees the advent of cyborgs as a recapitulation of pre-modern Western religious mysticism” (356). The purpose of Yod’s creation is not made clear until later in the novel, however.

Structurally, the novel interweaves the catastrophic present with, as John R. R. Christie, in “A Tragedy for Cyborgs,” notes, “the appropriate developmental stage” (188) of the two golems, Joseph and Yod. Christie continues, suggesting that “[t]he continuities and parallels

of action and character are such that the historical tale acts as the narrative paradigm. . . . Thus Yod's template is the golem Joseph; Avram, Yod's creator, mirrors Judah Loew" (188). The novel becomes a shocking retelling of the old story, once again focusing on the central question of cyborg/golem identity.

Knowing Singer's definitive story, one would expect a golem not only to be created to protect the community but also to be a creature prone to violence, to go beyond its original parameters, and even to attempt to take on human characteristics—including falling in love.

So it is with Yod.

As Malkah continues to educate Yod, she explains to him the background of the legend of the golem of Prague. She says to him, for example, "But as he [Joseph] opens his gray eyes on this night of *Rosh Hodesh* in the month of *Adar* he asks the Maharal, 'Father, was this a good thing to do?'" (81). The rabbi's answer, according to Malkah, is instructive: "It was a necessary thing. And you should not call me Father" (81). This sets up the thematic tension of the novel: was this—the creation of Yod—a good thing to do? Is Avram Yod's father? And is his creation necessary?

A golem-maker must be a *tzaddik*, a righteous person, and the intent must be to repair the world, to continue to improve upon God's creation. Avram's intentions are not clear, nor are Malkah's, but even Avram draws the comparison between the work Malkah is doing and the

creation of Joseph the golem: “You have trifled with Kabbalah all the years I’ve known you. Why do you bother? You’re a scientist, not a mystic” (258).

Her reply connects the Kabbalist and the scientist:

In turning all statements into numbers, isn’t *gematria* [part of Kabbalah, the calculation of the numerical equivalence of Hebrew letters] doing what a computer does? [If] the word is primary over matter, you may be talking nonsense about physics, but you’re telling the truth about people. (258)

Thus, she recognizes Judah Loew himself as a scientist, the foremost of his time, as she and Avram are of theirs.

Yod is a bit too perfect, however. Besides being designed to be stunningly handsome, he is understanding, sensitive, physically fit, not moody, sensitive, reliable, and a superb lover. He doesn’t sweat, and he even manages to kill the offending ex-husband! In short, he is Mr. Perfect. This allows Piercy to develop her strongly feminist view—can such a perfect male exist only as a cyborg? So why not simply create cyborgs and dispense with males altogether? But such a question neglects the primary purpose of golem making—*tikkun olam*, perfecting the world.

Yod’s golemic qualities, having been clearly established, foreshadow the tragedy to come; Yod also has the propensities of the golem to go beyond his initial creation, to develop as a man, thus

transcending the boundaries between human and machine. Malkah recognizes this: “I wonder if the programming I gave him to balance his violent propensities wasn’t a tragic error, if I did not do him an injustice in giving him needs he may not be able to fulfill” (340). Malkah’s role had been to prevent Avram’s cyborgs “who were programmed to protect, to be capable of efficient violence in the pursuit of goals they were given—from applying that violence to every obstacle” (351). So in killing the threatening ex-husband, for example, Yod is simply carrying out his programming. Covino notes that “like the golem who goes on an unintended rampage of death and destruction, the automaton will carry out directives without critical consciousness or conscience, even to the point of catastrophe” (364). So he did.

Since the two stories parallel, Yod—like his predecessor, Joseph—will need to be de-animated. He simply does as he is programmed to do by destroying the evil that threatens Tikva. His actual de-activation is different from many of the golem legends, however; he not only blows up the cyber-attackers, he deliberately kills his “father” Avram to ensure that no more cyborgs can be made. In so doing, Yod destroys himself as well. All that is left is the memory crystal containing his *emet*—his coding or his creation specs, his own Book of Creation.

In Singer’s telling of the legend, the golem’s body is taken to the attic of the synagogue. Other versions maintain that the golem’s clay, covered with old *siddurim*, may be re-activated when the community is

again threatened. Yod, however, is completely destroyed—and by his own doing, not his creator’s. Shira is momentarily tempted to re-create him since she possesses the crystal, but ultimately realizes that such creation is wrong. Christie says that Yod is not just “powered down and wrapped in code tape” (188), but totally destroyed beyond all possibility of re-creation. Yod leaves only a note that reads, “I have died and taken with me Avram, my creator, and his lab, all the records of his experiment. I want there to be no more weapons like me. A weapon should not be conscious” (415).

Discussion

Piercy’s setting of the golem legend in the future enables her to draw on the ancient story as a motif to bring up significant questions: the idea of creation itself, including the degree to which we may interfere with and perfect God’s creation; the feminist view of the perfect male; the question of what it means to be human; the parallel of Kabbalistic and scientific knowledge; and even the role of the state of Israel in the twenty-first century. In fact, the legend itself is Piercy’s narrative—but her story is more than a simple re-telling in a different setting. Creating Yod was wrong, she says; Yod himself says that “a weapon that’s conscious is a contradiction because it develops attachments, ethics, desires. It doesn’t want to be a tool of destruction. I judge myself for killing, yet my programming takes over in danger” (410). No pile of clay is left for another time, as we will see below in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier*

& *Clay* and *Snow in August*. Piercy's warning is quite clear—sentient beings are not permissible. So even though Singer's Rabbi Lieb (Loew) leaves open the possibility that the golem may return when it is needed, Piercy does not.

Yod's creator, Avram, is definitely not a *tzaddik*. While his motives for creating the illegal cyborg are in one sense commendable, his primary motive is knowledge itself, the ability to create. This is more like Victor Frankenstein than Rabbi Loew. Yod is even given copies of both *Frankenstein* and “a complete printout of his own specs” (236), so the parallel is obvious.

According to Sherwin, as noted above, Genesis 2.3—“So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation”—was clearly understood by the Talmudic rabbis to indicate that while the world was created, it was not complete (54). Since the human mission is to repair and improve the world, activities such as golem creation are acceptable only if they do exactly that. If they do not, they are not permissible. Thus the intent, rather than the action itself, is the issue. Does Avram improve the world in his creation of Yod? Piercy indicates that he does not, and so in usurping the powers of the creator, *Ha-Shem*, he ultimately destroys himself. He is definitely not God's partner.

Both Joseph and Yod desire to be human and, especially, to be Jewish. They have feelings, dreams, and hopes. Toward the end of *He*,

She, and It, the town of Tikva (having been informed that Yod is a cyborg) meets to decide his citizenship. Avram, in arguing that Yod is not human, says, "In sixteenth-century Poland it was ruled that a golem cannot be counted in a *minyan*" (276). But Yod replies, "I can carry out *mitzvot* as well as a born person" (276). Malkah maintains that Yod "is a person, but not a human person" (391). Yod himself says, "I was created as a Jew. I was programmed for *halacha*, with the need to carry out *mitzvot*" (405). Piercy does not give us the decision on his humanity and his Jewishness, for Yod is destroyed before their rabbis reach a conclusion. Similarly, Joseph in Singer's *The Golem* asks Rabbi Lieb, "Golem Bar Mitzvah?" (66). The answer is, sadly, no. And while Malkah splits hairs in saying that Yod is not a human person, ultimately Piercy answers this question with a "no" as well.

Conclusions

Bilski notes that historically, "Jews were a people without sovereignty, without an army. Traditional Judaism has fundamentally shunned force as a solution to conflict" (47). Piercy suggests that the state of Israel is a metaphorical golem as well, and she is highly critical of it: "The heritage we share now [is] of having had a nation [the Jewish State, Israel] in our name as stupid and violent as other nations; a lament for a lost chance, a botched redemption, a great repair of the world, *tikkun olam*, gone amiss" (393). Although Israel is a much larger

topic than can be addressed here, Piercy's context of *tikkun olam* suggests that she sees it as including redemption as well as repair. In this way, even *tikkun olam* can be misused. Scholem recognized the possibility of such a misuse in his dedication address of the first computer (called Golem Aleph) at the Weizmann Institute in Israel in 1966: "So I resign myself and say to the Golem and its creator: develop peacefully and don't destroy the world. *Shalom*" (qtd. in Bilski 47).

Yod—and speaking through Yod, Piercy—understands this well. Bilski says that "Judaism's ethical principles [must] retain the upper hand; ultimately violence only breeds more violence" (47). So even if Yod can carry out *mitzvot*, as Jews are commanded to do, ultimately he acts unethically within the principles of *halacha*, Jewish law, and so must be destroyed, as must all golems.

For Piercy, then, the golem legend functions not only as a plot device, paralleling the major story line of the novel, but also as a powerful tool for thematic development. By matching the two stories, she both acquaints the uninitiated reader with the golem legend and implicitly states that golem-making—ancient as well as modern—is dangerous. In *Tikva*, the danger is to Avram himself, just as Scholem warned; his arrogance, his pride, his conceit weaken his undeniable genius. He is no *tzaddik*. Friedman makes the interesting point that the miracle-working Jews like Rabbi Loew (Lieb) used their powers wisely; "they realized that moral responsibility begins, not ends, with creation"

(54). Covino supports this, saying that the sin is the creator's, "not that he made the golem to begin with but that he allowed the power of the writing [Yod's programming, perhaps] to get beyond his reach. . . . [T]he creator of the golem is obliged to ensure its obedience and restrict its development" (360). Avram never recognized that moral responsibility.

As a writer, Piercy also creates her golem, utilizing the magic of a new Kabbalah—Yod's coding—to express an ancient truth about golem-making. Through her novel, she too can perform *mitzvot*, offering the possibility of repairing the world through her stern warning about the perils of artificial creation. We are now on the brink of so many technological advances that could lead to the creation of conscious beings such as Yod, so her recognition that weapons should not be conscious is key. While such recognition is implicit in Singer's version of the story, Piercy's dystopian vision takes it much further. In this way, this novel advances the development of the legend of the golem.

CHAPTER FOUR

CYNTHIA OZICK: *PUTTERMESSER AND XANTHIPPE*

Ruth Puttermessenger's accidental golem in "Puttermessenger and Xanthippe" follows the pattern set by Singer in his version of *The Golem*: a ritualistic creation, a community to save, and finally a necessary deactivation when the golem runs amok. While New York is hardly sixteenth-century Prague, she replicates the good rabbi's creation of the golem. Cynthia Ozick, like Piercy, has a strongly feminist agenda as well, but skillfully ties this to a traditional tale of golem creation. In fact, Elaine Kauvar calls this novella "Cynthia Ozick's *Book of Creation*" (54), suggesting that its twelve parts echo the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Timothy L. Parrish, in "Creation's Covenant: the Art of Cynthia Ozick," elaborates upon this, arguing that "by playfully writing her own *Book of Creation*, Ozick can approach the theme of creation in a permissible form" (449).

But a female golem? While not unheard of, such a figure is unusual. Singer discusses the legend of Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol, a great Hebrew poet and philosopher of the Middle Ages, who created a female, mechanical golem—a rudimentary machine made not from clay but from wood and hinges. She was presumably created for sexual purposes, as well as to be his companion and housekeeper. When religious authorities heard of this, they ordered her destruction (Singer

6). This golem establishes the precedents of both a female golem, seen in Ozick's story, and a mechanical golem, predating the cyborg Yod (of Piercy's *He, She, and It*) by one thousand or more years.

And a golem created accidentally? Given the difficulty that Michael Devlin faces in creating his golem in *Snow in August*, as we will see, an accidental creation seems unlikely. And yet Ruth Puttermessenger does exactly that, at least in its physical creation. The golem is actually a projection of her own repressed self, her double, but recognized only at the end as she is forced to destroy her creation.

The Novella

An overly-intellectual, lonely, middle-aged woman, Puttermessenger (she is always called that) finds herself with no past—her childhood home was burned by arsonists—and no meaningful human entanglements. She prefers Plato to her erstwhile married lover, Rappaport. And she suffers from periodontal disease, which, according to Kauver, suggests “the dark passions that lurk within” (43). This hints at part of the story to come; her golem will be her *doppelgänger*—her dark double—“created not simply to fend off the enemies but to manifest its creator's anger,” says Sonheim. “At its core, the golem myth expresses what creating a golem can do within its maker” (377).

Although Puttermessenger is familiar with her Jewish past and has practically memorized Scholem's essay “The Idea of the Golem”—a clear foreshadowing of the golem-creation to come—she certainly does not set

out to create a golem. She cannot even remember fashioning the mud body until much later in the story. Although Puttermesser does yearn for a daughter, she avoids the human entanglements that might produce a child. In fact, by producing a “daughter” in this fashion, she avoids biology altogether (Parrish 451). In short, as Peter Powers observes in “Disruptive Memories: Cynthia Ozick, Assimilation, and the Invented Past,” since she has no personal history, she has no hope for the future. “Puttermesser is arrested in time” (84), he says. Her golem, then, while accidental, is her doppelgänger, doing what she cannot do.

Ruth Puttermesser has crowded her new apartment with plants, dragging in bags and bags of fertile soil for them. On the morning after the night she had chosen Plato over Rappaport, she had been imagining daughters, much like herself at different ages. So, as she picks up her lover’s abandoned *New York Times*, full of the current scandals and crimes of the city, she notes that the paper is as “heavy as if she carried a dead child” (37).

Walking to her bed, she is astonished to find what she believes to be a dead girl, somewhat incomplete and about fifteen years old. Puttermesser moves from one side of the bed to the other, then circles back around, continuing to move around and around the bed, trying to figure out just what a dead girl is doing in her bed; unconsciously, of course, she is performing the necessary ritual for golem-making.

Idel (in collaboration with Bilski) has commented on the ritualistic aspect of golem creation, suggesting that the “circling around an entity intended for destruction” is a medieval development and “may be part of a technique to induce an ecstatic trance” (21-22). Its purpose, Idel suggests, is that the golem itself is “not only a material creation but also a mystical experience, as Scholem has proposed, [and it] may well be that the dance is mentioned as part of that event” (22). Even Chabon’s Kavalier and Clay walk “in circles in the prescribed manner of golem makers” (171). And so Puttermesser circles the dirt figure.

While observing the shape, Puttermesser notices that the face is somewhat unformed. She corrects the mouth and notes that one nostril seems to have a tuft of hair askew; she blows into it to clear the dust. Then, aloud, she mutters the name of God because it just happens to be written on a slip of paper she finds—and the inert creature suddenly leaps straight from the bed! Puttermesser has accidentally created her golem. From there, the golem takes over the usual golem roles. She is mute, like Rava’s golem, and so communicates with her “mother”—as she insists on addressing Puttermesser—by writing notes. She soon sets out to correct the city’s ills, having been called into being to save the city, just as Rabbi Lieb’s (Loew’s) Joseph was called to save Prague.

As for her job, Puttermesser is a low-level flunky in the New York City bureaucracy. Although she has a law degree from a prestigious university, as a woman and a Jew she is relegated to the lower echelons,

and at this point has given up on promotion or professional advancement. Recognizing the corruption and futility of New York's massive bureaucracy, she occasionally fantasizes a perfect New York, a *gan eydn*, a new Garden of Eden. Puttermesser "believed in the uses of fantasy" (36), the narrator says, foreshadowing the action to come. Her days are arid, meaningless; at work, nothing blooms for her (26). She works for incompetent political appointees, teaching them the job she can do so much better. She understands the workings of the bureaucracy, but she believes it does not have to be that way.

The golem, initially named Leah, insists on being called "Xanthippe" after Socrates' wayward wife. Puttermesser soon realizes that, like Singer's rabbi, she has brought her golem into existence to save the city. She has read that a vision of Paradise is necessary to animate a golem. So her vision of New York—"A city washed pure . . . reformed, restored" (64)—leads Xanthippe to take on Puttermesser's task of cleansing the city. How better to do this, Xanthippe reasons, than to defeat the bureaucracy dominating Puttermesser by making her mother mayor! And so she does.

Once Puttermesser becomes mayor, Xanthippe is essentially the engine of her administration, as Parrish notes (452). Puttermesser plans to fill her government with poets and philosophers—Wallace Stevens, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Emily Brontë, even Walt Whitman—but it is Xanthippe who makes the new administration possible. Like her

predecessor, Rabbi Loew's golem, she rescues the city; with Puttermesser as mayor, "the youths who used to terrorize the subways put on fresh shirts and walk out into Central Park. . . . They have formed themselves into dancing clubs, and crown one another's heads with clover" (76). Flutes play; the streets sparkle, there is even unemployment among the correction officers. All is perfect, harmonious: "The slums undo themselves, stoops sparkle, new factories and stores buzz" (77).

But Puttermesser's periodontal troubles worsen during her tenure as mayor, since "she who had abolished crime in the subways was unable to stem gum disease in the hollow of her jaw" (79)—once again suggesting the enemy within.

As the city renews itself, so does Xanthippe—she grows. And grows. And grows—so large, in fact, that she no longer fits into her clothes or her bed. Parrish suggests that this growth reflects the fact that there is no provision for what is to be done once the work is complete. He argues, "Once her vision has been realized, there is nothing to do but destroy it" (453). This golem discovers sex and becomes insatiable; her attention drifts and no longer does she attend to the needs of the city—and here we see the golem doing what the repressed mayor cannot. She is "acting out her creator's own urges . . . [reflecting] Puttermesser's repressed need to have power over the men who had power over her" (Parrish 452). Ironically, Xanthippe's first sexual partner is Rappaport,

the man Puttermesser had refused by choosing Plato instead. Xanthippe is insatiable, and as her sexual craving grows, so does she.

Discussion

Even as Puttermesser's doppelgänger, Xanthippe recognizes their connection: "[C]reator and created,' the golem wrote, 'merge'" (69).

Puttermesser, too, sees this:

[B]ut who . . . is the true golem? Is it Xanthippe or is it Puttermesser? Puttermesser made Xanthippe; Xanthippe did not exist before Puttermesser made her; that is clear enough. But Xanthippe made Puttermesser Mayor, and Mayor Puttermesser too did not exist before. And that is just as clear. Puttermesser sees that she is the golem's golem. (78-79)

Wisniewski's *Golem* emphasizes the same dark double aspect of the story as we see here, but as much through pictures as text. In his story, the golem clearly expresses his maker's anger, releasing the violence that the rabbi himself cannot. The golem actually asks his maker, "Father . . . was this a wise thing to do?" (n.p.). As always, this golem must be destroyed, but he, like Xanthippe will do, argues for his life. The story ends, saying "perhaps, when the desperate need for justice is united with holy purpose, Golem will come to life once more" (n.p.).

So things fall apart. Xanthippe is—shall we say—busy. Ozick's verbs describe her change: now she "thumps" out to greet Rappaport

(83), she “lumbers” (78) and she “thumps” (85) again, but before “Eros entered Gracie Mansion” (82) she “scrambled” and she “churned” through offices (71). In short, she is out of control—typical of genus golem. “The golem will no longer obey. She cannot be contained. ‘My blood is hot,’ Xanthippe writes” (86). And since the golem wants only sex, Mayor Puttermesser’s *gan eydn*, the perfect city, is lost as well: “The prisons are open again. The press howls. The golem has destroyed her” (87).

So Xanthippe, like Joseph and so many other golems, must be deactivated. But how? Lured into bed by Rappaport, the torpid Xanthippe is destroyed—Puttermesser undoes the rites by circling round and round the bed, but in the reverse direction. All must be reversed; the Name must be erased. The Name—those freckles lightly dotting Xanthippe’s forehead—form the Hebrew *emet*, truth. Rappaport, in bed with the “dying” golem, blows aside the golem’s hair and “with his small blade erased from Xanthippe’s forehead what appeared to be no more than an old scar—the first on the right of three such scars—queerly in the shape of a sort of letter K. . . . Instantly the golem shut her lips and eyes. . . . The *aleph* was gone” (99). Without the *aleph*, the Hebrew letters *mem* and *tav* are left, spelling *met*, or death.

Dying, however, the golem begins to speak. “O my mother,” she says, “Why are you walking around me like that?” And “O my mother, do not send me to the elements” (99). Suggestively, Xanthippe is able to

speak, but only just before she “dies.” As we have seen, even Rava could not create a creature able to speak; Idel recognized that this inability implied some limitation on the part of the righteous creator (31).

Xanthippe’s new-found power of speech is ambiguous; it could suggest either her own new-found humanity—the power of speech has been equated with having a soul—or Puttermesser’s ultimate success as a creator, since the earliest rabbis saw this as a test of the maker’s piety. At the end of the novella, after Puttermesser has disposed of the clods of earth that had been Xanthippe, she undergoes periodontal surgery, and “when it is over, the roots of her teeth are exposed” (101). And so she grieves—“O lost Xanthippe! O lost New York” (101).

Conclusions

Ozick’s Book of Creation—her own golem—offers an image of a *gayn eden*, a world which was created to be made, and so fulfills the requirements of *tikkun olam*. The golem legend allows Ozick to explore the depths of the human psyche through the doubling of Puttermesser and Xanthippe. Ultimately, even Puttermesser recognizes that in de-activating her golem, she is de-activating a part of herself, the self that Kauver says had “been sacrificed for dedication to the intellect” (52).

Ozick emphasizes the double nature of Xanthippe and Puttermesser; in fact, she suggests that both are almost golems of one another. As Puttermesser ritualistically circles her “dying” golem, “Xanthippe lay stretched at Puttermesser’s feet like Puttermesser’s own

shadow” (99)—which of course she was. The golem is a projection—a shadow—of her creator’s repressed anger or desires, symbolized by periodontal disease. But what does creating this golem do to Puttermesser, as Scholem has warned us? The sexual voraciousness of the golem ultimately defeats her. Although it seemed possible for a moment, her beautiful New York is gone. The Mayor realizes that she had not foreseen this; hadn’t she read that “a golem will at length undo its creator?” (88). She is utterly defeated; in New York the “proud young men of the dancing clubs defect and return to mugging in the subways” (86).

As a *tzaddik*, a righteous person, Puttermesser is similar to Rabbi Lieb of Singer’s version of the story. Although Xanthippe’s creation is, initially, unintentional, she is called upon to rescue the community from danger. In a sense, Puttermesser, by projecting her own repressed sexual desires onto Xanthippe, does ask her to do something beyond her reason for existence. Once Eros enters Gracie Mansion, the golem is no longer under control. She is hot. So, as is true of golems, she must be destroyed. In this way Ozick utilizes the golem motif to discuss the limitations of the creator, a theme we have seen in Piercy’s destruction of the cyborg Yod and will see below in *Snow in August*.

CHAPTER FIVE

PETE HAMILL: *SNOW IN AUGUST*

The ghetto of Prague, so lovingly created in Singer's *The Golem*, appears once again in Pete Hamill's *Snow in August*, but only in the memories of Rabbi Hirsch. Both are stories of ethnic intolerance; each leads to the necessity of the creation of a golem. Hamill's story has simply been transplanted to the new world. But we have no Rabbi Lieb here, although Hamill has substituted an Irish Catholic boy for the Maharal, showing the adaptability and dynamism of the legend.

Hamill's golem in *Snow in August* is a superhero who swoops in to save the day, functioning much as the ancient Greeks used the *deus ex machina* to settle a seemingly irresolvable conflict. This ending, however, suggests that only magic can overcome terror and destruction. Such magic is sweet, but it does not solve more serious questions regarding both the golem and the nature of prejudice.

Hamill's golem is different from the other golem stories considered in this study. This golem is used to rescue not only the Jewish community, as is the case in the more traditional stories, but an Irish Catholic boy as well. Rabbi Hirsch had been unable to summon the golem, but young Michael Devlin succeeds. The story is a classical *bildungsroman*, with Michael gaining wisdom—too much, perhaps—in an

encounter with the neighborhood tough. That Hamill, an Irish Catholic, chose to use a Jewish myth in such a story is intriguing, and it suggests that the golem story has progressed beyond its Jewish roots into the wider culture. The golem has become a universal figure, particularly to those cultures that have suffered ethnic intolerance.

In an interview with Pete Hamill in *Tikkun*, Jack Newfield says that Hamill “sees his novel *Snow in August* as a triumph of the Jewish spirit” (24). Hamill, discussing his experience growing up in Brooklyn, says that he “wrote the book almost as a thank-you to the Jewish culture, because it taught you three things that you want to pass along: moral intelligence, irony, and tenacity” (26). After World War II, Hamill learned of the horrors of the Holocaust and asked himself how such a thing could have happened. Of course, these questions go beyond the Jewish people, but he suggests that New York, the city that evolved soon after the war, became “one of the greatest Jewish cities that has ever existed in terms of the high culture, the intellectual life, the triumph of City College” (26). He sees this as one of the themes of his book. Speaking in the voice of the Jewish community, he says, “You can kill us, you can isolate us, you can keep us out of your goddamn country clubs. You can create quotas for our kids in your medical schools. You can do all those things. We will survive and we will dance” (26). This, then, was the immigrant Brooklyn in which he—like the children of all immigrant

families, whether they were Irish, Italian, Polish, Jewish, black—grew up, and his book, he says, celebrates the immigrant experience.

The Novel

Like Chabon's Josef Kavalier, as we will see, eleven-year-old Michael Devlin loves magic. He dreams that he will only need to cry "*Shazam*," and goodness will triumph. The year is 1946; the story, signaling a fairy tale, begins with the traditional "once upon a . . ." (1). Michael loves *Captain Marvel* comic books, and he knows that the letters of the wizard's name, *Shazam!*, stand "for Solomon, Hercules, and Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury" (2)—the superheroes of legend, all combined in Captain Marvel. So the book begins with Michael and letters—much like the Kabbalists who recognize the power of letters as well. In *Captain Marvel*, the wizard tells the boy that he can fight evil "because he is pure of heart" (3)—again, suggesting that the one who has access to the magic words and is pure in heart is a *tzaddik*. Michael has been steeped in tales of Irish magic, of Finn MacCool (who, like the golem, saved the Irish people), and of his childhood magical dog Sticky. He's ready to believe in magic. But, of course, on the streets of Brooklyn, simply crying "*Shazam!*" will not protect Michael, no matter how pure of heart he is; he must face the streets alone.

The novel opens with Michael trudging off through the snow to his church to fulfill his duties as an altar boy. On his way home he is

stopped by a bearded man who calls to him, “Please to come over” (16). Michael hesitates, recognizing—and fearing—the synagogue, but does stop. In a heavy Yiddish accent, the man identifies himself as a rabbi and asks Michael to turn on the lights, something the rabbi cannot do because it is *Shabbos*. And so begins a friendship between Irish Catholic, eleven-year old Michael and orthodox Rabbi Hirsch.

Michael’s real world is a neighborhood of poor immigrants—Irish, Italian, Polish, and Jewish. With his best friends, he witnesses the anti-Semitic beating of Mister G, the proprietor of the local candy store. Frankie McCarthy, neighborhood thug and Hitler facsimile, and his gang, the Falcons, first taunt Michael and then turn on Mister G when he tells them to leave Michael alone. “You Jew prick,” Frankie screams. Mister G slams the counter. “Don’t call me a Jew prick . . . you, you Irish son of a bitch” (36), he shrieks. Michael can only cower in the corner, under the Captain Marvel comic books, while Frankie viciously beats Mister G; for Michael, there are no words. No *Shazam!* This is real—as real as the parallel with the Holocaust, with Frankie a menacing Hitler figure. Swaggering out of the store, Frankie turns to Michael and says threateningly, “You didn’t see a fucking thing, did you, kid?” (37). With the nickel the rabbi had given him for turning on the synagogue lights, Michael calls the ambulance.

Hamill, in Newfield's interview, comments that:

97 percent of the candy stores [in Brooklyn] were owned by Jews. . . . They lived in the back of the stores. They worked all day. They were up at six and they closed the store at ten at night. And they did it so their kids wouldn't have to run candy stores. And the kids went to CCNY, and they went on a lot of places. . . . Because the deal in America, which every immigrant was ever taught, which I was taught as a kid, was you can be anything in this country if you work for it. (26)

Mister G is clearly from Hamill's childhood, but with him the contract is violated. He works hard, but he does not make it.

Michael believes in the code of the street. He won't squeal. But Frankie's got it in for him. Improbably, though, Michael takes refuge with Rabbi Hirsch. They make a deal; the rabbi will teach him Yiddish, while Michael will teach him both American English and baseball. The narrator says, "Words themselves had a special power and mystery to Michael. In Latin or in Yiddish, they were like those secret codes used by spies or members of secret societies" (84). Thus Hamill continues to develop Michael as a potential golem-maker, one who will have access to the necessary magic words. The lessons continue. Both the rabbi and the boy see language as a form of magic and, "like magicians," they realize "that one name for a thing might be hiding another name. A secret name" (97). Again, Hamill alludes to the Kabbalists.

Michael learns of “magical Prague” (107), the rabbi’s original home—so magical that once “snow fell in August” (111). Magic was everywhere, the rabbi says; for the Jews it was “the magic of the Kabbalah” (107). The rabbi tells Michael of “formulas passed across the millennia, whispered from one Jewish wise man to another from the time of Adam” (112). And, of course, behind all those words and the magic is the secret name of God. Michael also learns of Rabbi Loew, a “true wizard” (113), after whom Rabbi Hirsch was named.

The actual golem-creation does not occur until the end of the novel, after both Michael and Rabbi Hirsch have been severely beaten by Frankie and his henchmen. Like Rabbi Loew, Michael must act. Having learned of Kabbalah and the golem from the rabbi, he dresses in white—his white baseball pants, a white T-shirt, and sneakers. “Was he really dressing in white, for purity, to summon a living creature from dirt?” he questions himself. “Was he to be like Dr. Frankenstein?” (351). But no: Dr. Frankenstein’s motives are not pure. Michael’s are. Still, both Michael and Hamill make the connection. So he goes to the park, molds a human-like shape from the mud, follows the instructions he has read (and whispers an “Our Father” for good measure. It can’t hurt, he thinks). Finally, he inscribes the sacred Hebrew letters for *emet*, truth (אמת—*aleph; mem; tav*) on the clay figure’s forehead. He then begins to chant, his words leading ultimately to the sacred name of God. For, as he had learned about Kabbalah, it is “all about letters . . . for from letters we

make words, and words are the names of life” (356). And to himself he whispers, “Believe. I believe” (354).

The mud begins to glow. The two dark hands move and the sorrowful eyes open. “I’m Michael Devlin,” the boy says. “Can you understand me?” The golem nods, but—true to most of the golem legends—cannot speak. It can, however, clearly understand. And so Michael, the Catholic altar boy, invokes the name of God, for, like Rabbi Loew of Prague, he must save the community from the scourge of anti-Semitism.

Together they find a cape to clothe the golem, and Michael fastens it with an “I’m for Jackie” button, his tribute to the Brooklyn Dodger rookie Jackie Robinson. To the golem Michael says, “You look like you could fly!” (360)—reminding us of other superheroes. So Hamill’s golem, this caped wonder, is the Escapist, Captain Marvel, and even Superman, but he embodies only the superhero portion of the golem legends. He has little complexity, nor is his character ever developed. With only a few passing references to his thoughts, we do not discover the pathos we see, for example, in Yod’s voluntary self-destruction, nor do we see much of the internal conflict of the golem-maker that is so evident in other works.

Discussion

Golem-making is not dangerous—yet—for young Michael Devlin. While for the moment the golem does become his doppelgänger, it is not

used incorrectly to do other than that for which it was created. With the beautiful, magical ending, as the rabbi dances with his wife—something they had never been able to do—the golem picks up the *shofar* and blows a melancholy tune, one the rabbi knows by heart, a tune addressed to the angels (as is said of *Kol Nidre*). Michael knows that the golem needs to be de-activated, as does the golem itself, but this is not done in the novel. Echoing Ecclesiastes, Michael simply says, “There will be time. There will be time” (382).

While the actual golem appears to play a relatively small part in the novel, we have seen the Kabbalistic themes woven through *Snow in August*—the references to the power of words, to the Kabbalah, to the magic of the old Irish legends. Michael recognizes the relationship between the golem legend and Captain Marvel (so do Sammy and Josef when they create the Escapist in *Kavalier & Clay*, as we will see below). He even sees the golem-maker as a sort of modern Dr. Frankenstein (he had seen these movies and so recognizes the danger). The ending of the novel can be viewed in several ways, however.

We have either magical realism or the Greek *deus ex machina*, but the actual golem appears so late in the novel that its creation is more like Superman swooping in, satisfactorily disposing of evil in the person of Frankie McCarthy and helping the rabbi reunite with his wife as they dance off together. The ending is sweet and poignant, since we know the golem will be returned to dust, but finally simply sad. Must we have a

golem arrive in the nick of time? Cannot the Frankie McCarthys of the world be disposed of in some other manner? Frankie, neighborhood thug and Hitler prototype, bullies at will and cannot be stopped except by magic. Still, Hamill warned us. Beginning the novel with “once upon a . . .” certainly is suggestive of a magical and mysterious fairy tale.

Viewed in one way, this ending is highly satisfactory. Good wins, evil is defeated, New York becomes magical Prague, and, in this world, Captain Marvel is real. *Shazam!* We like good to triumph and evil to be defeated, and it is easy to forget that it takes magic to allow this to happen. Perhaps only in art is the need for good to triumph truly satisfied; real life is far messier. So *Snow in August* is unabashedly romantic. While it deals with a young boy and his coming of age—a standard topic, ranging from *Catcher in the Rye* to *The Chosen*—the topic goes far beyond the familiar, romantic view of the good-guy-defeats-bad-guy-and-evil-is-defeated story. True, young Michael has an awakening, albeit a sad one: prejudice exists, and Jackie Robinson won’t always win.

The ending also emphasizes Michael’s purity, allowing him to be a *tzaddik* because “he is pure of heart” (3). The novel opens with Captain Marvel teaching him to fight evil. While it is not as simple as just crying *Shazam!*, these magic words are not so different from those of the Kabbalah. Perhaps this innocence and purity is what allows Michael to succeed in creating the golem, while the rabbi fails.

But why did the rabbi fail to animate the golem? Perhaps he simply had not attained the level of righteousness necessary to do so. For, as Singer says, “only the most saintly rabbis were given this power” (25). Furthermore, his motives—saving Leah—were personal, not collective, and so perhaps not pure enough. Unlike Rabbi Lieb, he actually wanted to create a golem. But “such are the rules of magic that the slightest misuse spoils its power” (58). Rabbi Lieb’s creation of the golem is done only reluctantly, with full awareness of the possible consequences. Rabbi Hirsch’s motives, while understandable, are not so pure.

The violence of the scene in which Michael’s golem defeats the evil Frankie, casually breaking his legs one after the other, is disturbing as well; must Jews resort to this in order to save themselves? And what will happen to them if they do so? Elie Wiesel, in his version of *The Golem*, says that “Jewish law counsels us to oppose violence and bloodshed with words and prayers rather than with more violence and bloodshed” (42). So perhaps it is not that Rabbi Hirsch did not “love God enough,” but rather that he—possibly unknowingly—is following the wisdom of the Maharal in not creating a golem. The Maharal, Wiesel says, being “impotent before the immensity of cruelty, refused to submit to being cruel himself” (44); rather, he chose to question even God himself before reluctantly creating the golem. In this way, Rabbi Hirsch avoids creating not only a golem, but a dark shadow of himself.

Conclusions

Hamill's use of the golem legend suggests that the story itself, while quintessentially Jewish, has much more than just a Jewish theme. It speaks of creation and magic, of good and evil. This golem never becomes evil, and even though Hamill gives passing notice to Shelley's *Frankenstein*, it never becomes the vicious monster that Sherwin describes, "a destructive creature draw[ing] more upon the story of *Frankenstein* than upon Jewish versions of the golem legend" (19).

Hamill's golem is actually more like the golem of the second phase of the legend, even though it was created by an Irish Catholic boy; its power never extends beyond the point where its creator can no longer control it. This golem, like Joseph in the traditional Rabbi Loew stories, is brought into existence for practical reasons, to defend the innocent in some way, and its existence can easily be stopped.

This use of narrative itself as golem-creation—the fourth stage of the evolution of the golem legend—is clear in *Snow in August*. Hamill is, as he has said of Michael, "pure of heart"—perhaps a modern *tzaddik* or Kabbalist himself. He creates his golem—*Snow in August*—with the real magic of language, with the pure intention to thank the Jewish people and to warn us of the danger of bigotry. In this way, Hamill utilizes the golem metaphor to perform his own version of *tikkun olam*. Certainly that charge—to improve the world—is not specifically Jewish. Such use suggests the universality of the metaphor.

Furthermore, the intentions of the golem-maker are significant, and these intentions separate the golem-makers from the Frankensteins. The golem-maker must intend something good, even though the results may be unpredictable. Since Hamill's golem-maker, young Michael Devlin, intends to improve the world, to right wrongs, his success at creation suggests that the wrongs in the world can be righted—at least through fiction.

CHAPTER SIX

MICHAEL CHABON:

THE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF KAVALIER & CLAY

In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Michael Chabon clearly lays out his theory about the relationship between the artist and the golem-maker. The artist, a type of Kabbalist, creates with his art a golem, brought into being by language. And since the Kabbalist is a magician, the novel probes the nature of magic, even of enchantment. As Chabon suggests, “magician[s] seemed to promise that something torn to bits might be mended without a seam, that what had vanished might reappear, that a scattered handful of doves or dust might be reunited by a word . . . but everyone knew that it was only an illusion” (359).

Chabon observes that “Enchantment, of course, is the work of language, of spell and *spiel*. A golem is brought to life by means of magic formulae, one word at a time” (“Writing” X06)—as is art. He continues, asserting that it was not the “metaphor or allegory of the *nature* of making golems and novels, but that of the *consequences* thereof” (“Writing” X06) that intrigued him. He was strongly influenced, he says, by Scholem’s essay “The Idea of the Golem” and cites Scholem’s concern about the danger of golem-making. Sammy Clay, one of his main characters, reiterates this toward the end of the novel when he says, “it looks like it’s kind of dangerous, making a golem” (580). Chabon says

that “much of the enduring power of the golem story stems from its ready, if romantic, analogy to the artist’s relation to his or her work. . . .” However, Chabon adds, “The idea of the novelist as the little God of his creation” (“Writing” X06) seems too easy. He suggests that Scholem’s warning is about what a golem’s creation does to its creator—in this case, both Chabon as novelist and Josef and Sammy as characters and artists themselves.

Since so many golems end by threatening their creators, Chabon’s analogy here implies that the novelist/Kabbalist is actually at risk. Such risk, he acknowledges, is accurate. From writers imprisoned for their ideas in the old Soviet Union—whose own words too often had the power to destroy them—to the *fatwah* (call to murder) issued against Salman Rushdie for his *Satanic Verses*, writers do endanger themselves. The risk is that of exposure; will readers attribute disturbing ideas or embarrassing acts to the author? How personal is what one writes? In this way, does one’s creation—the novel, a pen-and-ink golem—threaten its creator?

The Novel

Chabon’s sprawling, Pulitzer Prize-winning (2001) novel is, at heart, a story of magic and the magician, of escape and the escapist, using the golem as a trope for rescue and hope. A golem is a magical creature, created by a magician-Kabbalist, who in some way either escapes his own bounds or allows others to escape theirs. The young

protagonists, Sammy Clay and Josef Kavalier, serve all of these roles; they escape their world, they create another—*The Escapist*—through their creation of a superhero/golem figure. Most importantly, they must both escape their own realities. The specter of evil, Adolf Hitler, is marching through Europe, while the golden age of comic books has begun in America. Through all of this, Chabon weaves magically the golem motif.

Once again we are taken to Prague and reminded of Singer's Rabbi Lieb. In Singer's adaptation of the story—and our definitive version—the clay remains of the golem were taken to the attic of the synagogue in Prague, there to remain until needed again.

Chabon's story also begins in Prague, but in 1935, with young Josef Kavalier and his fascination with Houdini. As a Jew, Josef—such a suggestive name!—is quickly confronted with the need to escape; he, however, is not the only one who needs to escape. The actual golem is being sought by the Nazis. Fearing that they might find it, and also wanting to help his pupil escape, Bernard Kornblum arranges for Josef to be hidden in the coffin of the golem itself and spirited out of Prague. Oddly, the body of the golem in this story remains intact, with only “the faintest trace of the human handprint on its forehead” (64), weighing “far less than its bulk and nature would have suggested” (64). Josef's teacher, citing *midrash*, says of the lightness of the golem, “His soul is a burden unto him” (64), arguing that because the golem has no soul, it

has no weight. So Josef climbs into the coffin, “to lie with the empty vessel that once had been animate with the condensed hopes of Jewish Prague” (64), and—as he will all his life—escapes. Whether he is escaping from something or to something, however, is not yet clear.

Arriving by circuitous travels to New York, Josef—now Americanized as simply Joe—meets up with his cousin, Sammy Clay—another suggestive name—and together they create their new Superman, the Escapist. With his golden key, he can unlock the chains that bind the downtrodden of the world. And so the American golem comes into being, created by those new Kabbalists—Kavalier & Clay—who summon their golem “into existence through language . . . [although their] golem [is] to be formed of black lines and the four color dots of the lithographer” (119).

Anapol, their publisher, exclaims when he sees their first drawings of the Escapist, “[I]s that the Golem? My new Superman is the Golem?” (86). Joe replies in his ungrammatical, broken English, “I just drew the first thing I could think of that resembled . . . To me, this Superman is . . . maybe . . . only an American Golem” (86), and Sammy replies, “Yeah, sure, but, Joe . . . the Golem is . . . well . . . *Jewish*” (86). As they dream and draw, they stroll about Manhattan, “talking and dreaming and walking in circles in the prescribed manner of golem makers” (171).

What, then, is the effect, the *consequence*, as Chabon emphasizes, of golem-making—of creating the Escapist—for Sammy and Joe?

Superman, a “super-American” in so many ways, had appeared in June 1938, created by a couple of Jewish boys and born “in the pages of a comic book” (77) to “express the lust for power and the gaudy sartorial taste of a race of powerless people” (77). Sammy and Joe, in creating their Superman, the Escapist, not only refined the superhero; they bared their souls to the world and, in the end, were defeated by that world. For them, golem making was, indeed, dangerous.

Other than the contents of the coffin that transports Josef out of Prague, no actual golem exists in this novel (other than the novel itself, of course, a golem made of paper and ink). And yet the golem motif is central. Since golems may be made of ink as well as mud, the Escapist is also a golem. He can do what the heroes cannot, functioning as the doppelgänger of the creator, in the same way that Michael Devlin’s golem or Puttermesser’s Xanthippe are able to do what their creators cannot.

Josef, reflecting on all that had happened by the end of the novel, says that the shaping of a golem was “a gesture of hope, offered against hope, in a time of desperation. It was the expression of a yearning that a few magic words” might enable one, like the Escapist, to “slip free of the entangling chain of reality and the straitjacket of physical laws” (582). Lee Behlman, in “The Escapist: Fantasy, Folklore, and the Pleasures of the Comic Book in Recent Jewish American Holocaust Fiction,” argues that the golem represents the dream of escape, “which . . . involves a flight from both the physical bondage of the Nazis and the imaginative

bondage that may limit the expression of any artist” (68). Within the superhero comic book fantasy world, the Escapist does fulfill the fantasy of protecting the persecuted—in fact, he even enacts retribution on Hitler and his cronies—but unfortunately for Josef, this is merely a fantasy, and the Escapist cannot rescue his brother, Thomas. Josef recognizes as well that such fantasies could fuel the desire for vengeance.

As we have seen above, Hamill faced a similar problem in *Snow in August*. Michael Devlin’s golem defeats the forces of evil in the guise of a neighborhood anti-Semitic tough guy. This golem does swoop in to avenge the good guy and rescue the community, as does the Escapist. But the violence of Michael’s golem echoes Josef’s concern about the desire for vengeance. Sonheim also mentions this concern, when she says that a golem may “express the violence of the created golem as latent within the character of its creator” (377).

Later, Josef himself, now a United States serviceman, reveals that he has been working on a comic book based on the golem legend. Behlman observes that Josef thinks this work will help to heal him, “not by erasing his memories of the pre-American Jewish past, but by recasting them in comic book form” (68). In this way the golem, now a comic book superhero, will help him to understand—and to escape, finally—what happened in pre-Holocaust Europe.

When Josef returns to America from his stint in the service, he “escapes” by living in a hole in the Empire State Building. He recognizes

that he has escaped from everything—“ropes, chains . . . countries and regimes” (575)—but not from reality. Such escape is, he feels, a worthy challenge. The magic of escape is “not the apparent magic of the escape artist . . . but the genuine magic of art. It was a mark of how fucked-up and broken was the world—the reality—that had swallowed his home and his family” (576). His “genuine magic of art” is his long, unpublished comic book entitled *The Golem*. In it he develops “potent motifs of Prague and its Jews, of magic and murder, persecution and liberation, guilt that could not be expiated and innocence that never stood a chance” through the story of “Josef Golem [a name reminiscent of Singer’s golem], that sacrificed itself to save and redeem the little lamplit world whose safety had been entrusted to it” (576).

Sammy, after reading it, says to Joe, “You have an awful lot of Jewish stuff in here. . . . What’s the matter with you, did you have a relapse?” (584), questioning whether Joe is retuning to more traditional Jewish practices. “It is awfully Jewish,” Joe agrees critically, and then asks, “Kabbalah, is that what it’s called?” (584). Joe tells Sammy that “half the characters in there are rabbis” (585). With no hope of publication, Sammy acknowledges that Joe got him “all stirred up with this Golem thing of yours. . . . You always used to make it seem okay to believe in all this baloney” (590). Here one is reminded once again of Michael Devlin, of *Snow in August*, creating his golem as he whispers to himself, “Believe. I believe” (354). The belief was crucial to Michael’s

success; perhaps Joe should have believed as well. Joe replies, “I think it was okay. . . . I don’t think maybe neither of us should have stopped” (590).

Chabon ends the novel with a strange delivery at Sammy’s home—the coffin of the golem—but now the dirt is heavy, no longer weightless as it was when Josef escaped from Prague. Why? The ending suggests that since Josef lost his youth and all that was dear to him, he tries to escape this memory through comic books. The argument:

[comic books] offered merely an easy escape from reality; [this] seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf. He had escaped . . . [and] the escape from reality was, he felt—especially right after the war—a worthy challenge. (575)

In this way, Chabon is suggesting that the escape from reality offered by superheroes—our newest golems—is another way to protect and save the community, although in this case the community is our past. Behlman says that “Chabon shows, through his meditation on the thoroughly Jewish-American medium of early superhero comics, how fantasy may also act as an interruption to memory, a holding action against the incursions of the past” (70).

The ending seems somewhat contrived, however. The coffin simply arrives; we are never told how or why. The former golem within is now simply heavy clay, as we would suppose any de-activated golem to be.

However, when Josef escaped from Prague, the golem weighed nothing. The significance of this weight is simply not clear. Behlman suggests that the coffin is carrying the weight of dead European Jewish souls (70). This would echo Scholem's contention that "the golem [can] be interpreted as a symbol of the soul of the Jewish people" (204), now shifted to America. Behlman does acknowledge the complication of the novel's ending. Its structural function is to enclose the beginning and ending of the novel, but what is it that the delivery of the golem is to signify? And especially, what is meant by its weight?

Discussion

The golem in this story is transplanted from its dead European past to its new function as a modern metaphor, now seen in the new surge of Jewish creativity in the new world. The Escapist, like the Joseph created in the ghettos of Prague by Rabbi Loew, is but a creation of fantasy, intended to save its creators and their community from harm; likewise, this vision of a new golem, the American superhero, is also a fantasy creation, and its job is to save the community once again. Interestingly, Josef's earliest drawing of the Escapist is a golem. Clearly, he sees the golem as representing hope in a time of desperation (Behlman 86).

Adam Kirsch, in "Idol Worship: Does the World Need Another Golem Novel?" says that Josef's Escapist is "a hero who can get out of any trap . . . [and] is clearly an exercise in wish fulfillment, invented by a

man helpless to rescue his actual family from the Holocaust” (par. 7). The modern golem, unlike the golem/Escapist of medieval Prague, cannot save the Jews; “the magic powers that produced the golem have been shrunken, in the twentieth century, to the comic-book artist’s powers of metaphor and imagination” (par. 7). Kirsch notes that “if ever the Jews of Central Europe needed a protector, it was in 1939” (par. 5). The rescue did not come, however, so he says that recent novelists are forced to question why. In fact, instead of being a rescuer, the only golem in Chabon’s novel is “itself in need of rescue” (par. 7), being sought by the Nazis. The fictional golem, he suggests, is still “waiting for the right novelist to give it life. But it will take some pretty powerful magic to make those clay feet move again” (par. 9). In post-Holocaust fiction, Kirsch argues, the golem “has become a symbol of pathos, as helpless as the Jews of Prague” (par. 5). However, in this study we have seen that these clay feet are indeed moving again, as the fourth phase of the golem legend continues to evolve.

John Podhoretz, in his *Commentary* review of *Kavalier & Clay*, argues that “Chabon’s Golem is a symbol of the murdered European diaspora [with] Josef and Sammy [being] . . . the remnant that fought impotently for its rescue” (71). But exactly what is Chabon’s “Golem,” as Podhoretz calls it? The Escapist? Sammy and Joe? Or even the novel itself? If we see the figure of the Escapist as a golem, then we have a fairly standard, superman-type, rescuing golem, merely transplanted to

the new world and duly caped to fit American sentiments. If we see Sammy and Joe themselves as golem-makers, creating their own golem in the *Escapist*, we are still seeing the righteous golem-maker of medieval tradition. But if we see the novel itself as a golem, then we can see Chabon himself as a golem-maker, using the golem legend as a metaphor for his own creation, in which the “magic of art” can indeed “repair the world” (576).

Seen in this way, the novel uses Jewish folklore as a way of approaching serious questions about the relationship of art and reality. Since art is not constrained by reality, the artists (magicians/Kabbalists/golem-makers) do have the ability to repair the world. Sammy and Joe try, of course. By means of the golem legend, the novel explores the problem of how some were able to escape the Holocaust—and some were not. The first issue of *The Escapist* even features the superhero battling a Hitler-esque figure:

As for Hitler [the man who would destroy Joe’s family] he came flying at you backward . . . It stirred mysterious feelings in the viewer, of hatred gratified, of cringing fear transmuted into smashing retribution, which few artists working in America . . . could have tapped so easily and effectively as Josef Kavalier. (150)

Only through the *Escapist* can Joe actually defeat Hitler and the forces of evil—“He had just won the Second World War, and he was feeling pretty good about it” (165)—and so save his family. Reality is not so kind.

Conclusions

Chabon can defeat the forces of evil through his own golem, the novel itself. But of course the novel is only an alternate reality. So even though the novel, using the “genuine magic of art,” fulfills the requirement of *tikkun olam*, the commandment to save the world, Josef cannot save either his family or the broken world. It is through the power of narrative that Chabon can at least suggest an approach. In this way his golem does indeed improve the world, and so shows the evolution of the golem motif.

The results of golem-making are unpredictable, and the intentions of the golem-maker are as significant, if not more so, than the product. Sammy and Josef, as golem-makers with their figure of the *Escapist*, can at least symbolically overcome evil. Likewise, Chabon himself, a golem-maker as well, considers the consequences of his own golem-creation. He says in “The Writing Life” that anything he “has written has, at some point during its composition, left [him] feeling uneasy and afraid” (“Writing” X06). But he also sees that this fear is part of creation, because writing involves one’s own truth, one’s *emet*. Chabon says that the fear signals that he is “following the recipe correctly, speaking the proper spells . . . [since] . . . telling the truth . . . is almost always a

frightening prospect” (“Writing” X06). If a writer does not tell the truth, the resulting work is merely “inanimate, a lump of earth” (“Writing” X06). Certainly *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is no “lump of earth”; its truth, using the golem legend as a trope for artistic creativity, shows that Chabon did indeed “follow the recipe correctly.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSIONS

When Singer was asked “why the myth of the golem . . . has interested so many creative people in the past and continues to do so even in our epoch” (6), he answered in true Yiddish tradition with a question: “Why shouldn’t this legend have influenced and intrigued creative minds?” (1).

He wrote “The Golem is a Myth for our Time” in 1984 (later reprinted as the Foreword to Bilski’s study) at the time of the opening of the New York Shakespeare Festival’s production of *The Golem* by Yiddish writer H. Leivick (Leivick Halpern). Having written his own version of the golem story only two years earlier, Singer was clearly aware of the power of the legend. He could not have known that Hollywood figures such as Madonna would embrace a stunted, cultish form of Kabbalah; that writers would continue to use the figure of the golem as a motif; that several serious science books would use the golem metaphor in their titles (*The Golem at Large: What You Should Know about Technology* and *The Golem: What You Should Know About Science*, both by Harry Collins and Trevor Finch); that the golem would become a monster figure in fantasy role-playing games; or that serious scholars such as Byron L.

Sherwin would connect the golem legend and developments in science. Singer was prescient.

The four writers discussed at length in this study, as well as numerous others, have used the golem legend for their own purposes: a doppelgänger, a plot device, a structural device, even a savior figure. The use at all is of the most interest, however. Why use an ancient Jewish legend as a trope for contemporary ideas?

The Jewish Week's book critic, Sandee Brawarsky, suggests that since the legend can be related to the Holocaust, to Israel, even to nuclear war, it is a ready metaphor for modern humanity. While some writers may have themes relating to the act of creation, she says, “for others, it’s about rescue, redemption, unleashing power, destruction or technology that’s gone out of control” (1). The legend can easily be used to apply the wisdom of the past to the issues and complexities of the present and the future.

True—but not enough. Beyond being simply the fad of the day among Jewish writers, the use of the “man of mud” must be more than that. Adam Meyer, in “Putting the ‘Jewish’ Back in ‘Jewish American Fiction,’” agrees with the idea that an overt concern with a sense of Jewishness can be seen on the part of younger writers, including Chabon and Ozick. He notes that “these writers confirm . . . the theory of third generation return, the idea that grandsons will want to remember parts of their grandparents’ lives that the fathers have wanted to forget, in this

case their ‘Jewishness’” (104). So these writers utilize, rather than deny, elements of *Yiddishkeit* to develop universal themes.

The Writer’s Golem

The Argentinean poet Jorge Luis Borges recognized the tools of the writer—consonants and vowels, exact letters and syllables—in his 1958 poem “El Golem”:

Thus, compounded of consonants and vowels,

Th

makers, having the potential to repair the world through their art and their craft.

According to the Kabbalists, *The Book of Creation*, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, contains the secrets of creation. These secrets are clearly kin to the mysteries of artistic creation. As Singer says, “each work of art has the elements of a miracle. The golem-maker [is], essentially, an artist” (1). Chabon also equates golem-making with the writer’s task, saying that “[a]s the kabbalist is to God, so is a golem . . . [in this case, the pen-and-ink version] . . . to all creation; a model, a miniature replica, a mirror—like the novel—of the world” (“Writing” X06). He emphasizes the same point in *Kavalier & Clay* when he refers to the purpose of the “genuine magic of art” in a “broken world” (576) as the novelist’s responsibility to contribute, however small, to the repair of an imperfect world.

Chabon likens writing a novel with creating a golem:

The adept [writer] handles the rich material, the rank river clay, and diligently intones his alphabetical spells, knowing full well the history of the golems. . . . In the same way, the writer shapes his story . . . to bring into being a little world that, like God’s, is at once terribly imperfect and filled with astonishing life. (“Writing” X06)

His “little world” is *Kavalier & Clay*. Piercy, Ozick, and Hamill use the ancient rituals to create actual golems within their narratives, but their novels are also their “little worlds”—their golems—that they have brought

into being. Those worlds may be terribly imperfect, but they are filled with life.

The novelists discussed in this thesis—Chabon would call them adepts, equating the novelist and the Kabbalist—are using the tools available to the artist, consonants and vowels, as Borges recognized. These tools are the same as those used by God to create the universe: words. With a modern variant of the ancient techniques of the Kabbalah, these writers create their golems and bring them to life, paralleling creation as described in Genesis and *The Book of J*.

In this way, these modern Jewish writers make use of the distinctive cultural and intellectual tradition of their heritage, applying an ancient story to the universal themes of modern humanity. The legend's new life goes beyond its earlier function of warning us of the perils of creativity; it now suggests that the writer can offer a way of perfecting our world.

The Scientist's Golem

The artist's ability to perfect the world is metaphysical, however. While poetic justice is possible in fiction or poetry, more physical methods of perfection are needed in the real world. The Polish poet Adam Zagajewski, in "Lightning," says, "we sought justice/and we found it. . . . In silence. In music. In a poem. We sought/justice, confusing it with beauty" (104). Wisniewski's *Golem* says that the "need for justice" must be "united with holy purpose" (n.p.), or beauty. That beauty, the artist's

“holy purpose,” is not sufficient, however; we also need to understand, as Zagajewski says: “We lived understanding little and craving/knowledge” (104)—echoing Victor Frankenstein’s error. Although art can offer us beauty, to actually perfect the world we will need to seek more physical means as well, and that is the role of the scientist, to go beyond seeking mere knowledge, to help us to understand.

Today’s scientist is also an artist. While the original golem-makers—the rabbis, the Kabbalists, and the artists—were the “fiction masters of their time,” says Singer, “today’s golem-makers are the scientists as well, since the gap between science and magic, science and art is becoming narrower” (8). Piercy clearly recognizes this connection, when Malkah sees herself as both a scientist and a Kabbalist. In many of the golem legends, the golem becomes independent, rebellious, perhaps a danger to its maker. How do these ancient legends resemble the golems of today—those created by our newest alchemists, the scientists? Can we control, or erase, the power we have given them? Ruth Puttermesser recognizes this:

. . . the golem-makers were neither visionaries nor magicians nor sorcerers. They were neither fantasists nor fabulists nor poets. They were, by and large, scientific realists—and, in nearly every case at hand, serious scholars and intellectuals: the plausible forerunners, in fact, of their great-

grandchildren, who are physicists, biologists, or logical positivists. (48)

We can easily see today's scientists as modern-day magicians, with all the powers of Merlin or Gandalf (of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*). Is the human genome project wizardry? And more importantly, is any of this magic forbidden? Bio-ethicist Laurie Zoloth, in her study of the *midrash* related to magic, reminds us that we need to question our responsibilities. These include, of course, ethical inquiry. She argues for "accountable, witnessed, and discussed research" (88), maintaining that the difference between curiosity, "driven by pride, vanity, the impulse to sin, or superstition" (88), and studiousness, the "virtue of temperance [that] leads us to sovereign truth" (88), can be our ethical guide. By these definitions, Victor Frankenstein was merely curious. Our scientists need to be studious.

Such an example can be found at Brandeis University (a traditionally Jewish University), home of the "The Golem Project: Automatic Design and Manufacture of Robotic Lifeforms" in which GOLEM stands for Genetically Organized Lifelike Electro Mechanics. The field is called "evolutionary robotics," with Hod Lipson and Jordan Pollack as primary investigators. They describe the Golem Project as "a set of experiments in which simple electro-mechanical systems [are] evolved from scratch to yield physical locomoting machines" (Lipson and Pollack). They further claim that "this is the first time robots have been

robotically designed and robotically fabricated.” Is this Yod’s beginning? Their choice of name—GOLEM—indicates that they are well aware of the relationship between artificial life and the golem legend.

Sherwin notes that in many of the ancient Jewish texts, if a golem is flawed or rampages, “one should investigate how that golem was initially created” (182). Through such investigation, one could learn how to control, or, if necessary, destroy it. This degree of responsibility and investigation should be true of the products of our latest golem-makers as well, the scientists. Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch, in *The Golem at Large*, continue the metaphor, saying that “Science is a golem” and that “a golem . . . powerful though it is, is the creature of our art and our craft” (2). The point of such a metaphor is that science is “a bit daft” (2). It is definitely messy; results often are unexpected and perhaps dangerous.

Final Thoughts

Singer, in saying that the golem is a myth for our time, argues that the legend can help us to understand our creations, and that we need to look at our motives for creation in order to understand them. He says that “the scientist [today’s Kabbalist] cannot be precise anymore. He often deals with objects of whose existence he is not sure and whose function he cannot define” (1). The scientist, of course, never was that precise, but Singer continues, asking whether we can control the golems of our times—nuclear bombs, cloning, stem-cells, artificial life—if they

develop their own volition. Can we deactivate them? Can we hide them in an attic under old *siddurim*?

Perhaps these scientists cannot repair the world. They are, after all, bound by reality. Artists, however, are not, and so through narrative can suggest ways that we can repair our broken world. Josef Kavalier sees art as genuine magic, magic that can indeed allow us to escape. In this way the writer works miracles, the same miracles that the Kabbalists of old sought. They too engrave *emet* on their creations as they seek to express their own truths, their visions of a repaired world—such is the function of narrative.

We find, in the end, that the legend itself is the golem. After all, Rabbi Loew never created a real golem; that can only be done through narrative. Knowledge of this legend has metaphorically offered a way for us to repair our world. The legend has grown, changed, been transmuted—occasionally even grown out of control. If a legend is a way of explaining the unexplainable, the irrational, the fear lurking just below the surface, then the legend of the golem is indeed an appropriate metaphor for *tikkun olam*, the Jewish commandment to repair the world. Writers achieve this in their own small worlds as well.

GLOSSARY OF HEBREW AND YIDDISH TERMS

Bar Mitzvah (trans. “Son of the Commandment”): thirteen-year-old Jewish boy, accepted into the congregation as an adult able to read from the Torah (feminine, modern: *Bat Mitzvah*)

Halakah: Jewish law

Ha-Shem: The Name, used when referring to God, to avoid pronouncing the divine *Tetragrammaton* when it appears in the Hebrew text

Midrash: rabbinic tales and explanations of the Torah

Minyan: The quorum necessary to recite certain prayers, consisting of ten adult Jewish men (modern: ten adult Jews)

Mitzvah (plural: *mitzvot*): good deeds

Shabbos (modern term: *Shabbat*): the Sabbath

Shalom: peace; hello; goodbye

Siddur (plural: *siddurim*): prayer book

Tikkun olam: healing the world

Tikva: hope

Tzaddik: a righteous man

Yiddishkeit: Yiddish, meaning Jewishness, a word suggesting a feeling of identification with the Jewish people

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