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Marissa Herzig
*University of Virginia*

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# On the Shoulders of Giants: Helene Wecker's Subversion of the Female Golem Myth

Marissa Herzig

*University of Virginia*

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**Abstract**

The subtle hierarchy which dictates who is granted and denied cultural authority is rarely more evident than when examining folklore through which "we can see all the shimmering, shadowy uncertainties of the world."[i] The myth of the Golem, a clay being in Jewish folklore, provides an ideal opportunity for engaging with the default equation of humanity and masculinity, an assumption present in most Golem stories. My research attempts to disrupt this hierarchy that places women as lesser and the human as superior by examining the recuperated figure of the female Golem. I interrogate intersections of the constructed categories of "female" and "human" in Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* through a close reading of the novel in which I place it in dialogue with feminist posthumanist discourse. Through elaboration upon the feminist critiques advanced by Wecker, I highlight these glimpses of post-humanist thought achieved by Wecker's feminist revision of the female Golem, investigating the way certain humanist ideas remain and limit the novel's feminist project. By drawing on post-humanist philosophy and feminist and Jewish feminist literary criticism to consider *The Golem and the Jinni*, I ultimately propose the necessity of post-humanist thought to the success of feminist interventions.

*Keywords:* Golem, Jewish Studies, Feminism, Posthumanism

Beginning from a recognition of the female Golem's resemblance to women in patriarchal culture, Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* figuratively reaches back to the etymological origins of the word "Golem" to find other possibilities. A Golem is not only a being of clay in Jewish folklore, but more figuratively, an unfinished creature: "…an unmarried woman was considered to be, like an unmarried man, an imperfect being, and she was referred to in classical texts as a Golem" (Idel 232). Moshe Idel provides insight on the connection between (human) women without masters/husbands and the non-human homunculi created only to serve male masters. Women are only complete when fulfilling their roles as servants to their husband and family. This view is echoed in the *X-Files* episode "The Golem": a grieving woman creates a male Golem to avenge her fiancé Isaac's death because she is unable to function independently, rendering her "a Golem in the sense that she is incomplete without Isaac" (Nocks 296). This connection is at the root of Wecker's use of the female Golem to look at women's construction as less fully human within patriarchal society. In *The Golem and the Jinni*, the female Golem's process of becoming integrated into human society coincides with learning to be a feminine caretaker.

At the same time, both novels explore the ontological potential of the Golem. Jewish historian Lisa Nocks has reconsidered this "missing, unfinished or unresolved" aspect of the Golem, arguing that the term imperfect should be understood as the "unformed (understood as unfinished, but with potential)" nature of the Golem's soul (283-84). This lack of a fully developed soul, Nocks concludes, guarantees that the Golem "implicitly remains subordinate to his creator

and to other humans" (284). However, just as the unfinished status links the unmarried woman and the Golem, conferring a less-than-human status on women, it can also imply human potential in the Golem. The Golem could become human in its finished state, and this is the potential that Wecker's Chava realizes. Wecker reverses the terms of this connection by exploring the development of the female Golem's selfhood as a rejection of the naturalized subordination of women.

As referenced above, Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* details the journey of the female Golem Chava, created by the estranged Rabbi Schaalman. Chava's master dies at sea on the way to New York City from Eastern Europe. Masterless, Chava navigates the social expectations of late-nineteenth century America with the help of elderly Rabbi Meyer. She meets Ahmad, a Jinni trapped for centuries who was spirited away from his homeland of Syria and now also is finding his place as an immigrant in America. After Rabbi Meyer dies, Chava marries his nephew to better fit in with her community. However, the climax of the novel reveals that Chava's creator, Rabbi Schaalman, was also the Jinni's master who had enslaved him, through his reincarnations, for centuries. The journey for their freedom and equality, as well as how Chava and Ahmad negotiate their separate identities as immigrant Others, delineates the story as one of immigrant experience and humanity. Wecker specifically legitimizes Chava by modernizing the ancient female Golem myth through the creation of a sentient and feeling character. Wecker joins other contemporary writers who reexamine and expand upon overlooked, degraded, or vilified characters, decentering the versions previously granted cultural authority.[ii] By mirroring the previous Golem myth of the female Golem created for a man's pleasure, Wecker expands on the

original myth in a full novel, thus participating in a broad movement which speaks to a bigger cultural shift in how women are represented.

In order to understand Chava's journey to freedom, it is necessary to investigate the undisputed authority of creators of Golems who effectively characterize the dominant male power structure. This imbalance has large implications in the context of the female Golem, since the placement of traditionally well-regarded holy men, called Tzaddikim, in the position of creators validates their misogyny and their creation of sexual slaves in the form of the female Golem, such as in the most infamous tale of the female Golem, attributed to Solomon ibn Gabirol, a Spanish poet and philosopher of the eleventh century, which details how he created a female Golem to be his housekeeper, companion, and sex slave.[iii] Wecker undermines this traditional role of the creator in *The Golem and the Jinni* through the female Golem Chava's creator Rabbi Schaalman. Schaalman's characterization as "brilliant, and reckless, and quite amoral," rather than revered, shifts the previous Golem narrative in a significant manner (Wecker 40). The basis of religious patriarchy stems from the assumption that G-d is above Adam, or Man, and that Man in turn is superior to Eve, or Woman. This structural relationship of someone in power creating a subordinate is mimicked in the creation of the Golem, in this case, Chava. This emphasis on the making of the Golem, and the specific diction, demonstrates a subtle critique of hierarchy.

Nonetheless, Schaalman is not a Tzaddik, or holy man, but rumored to be "a disgraced rabbi who'd been driven out of his congregation…[and] liked to dabble in the more dangerous of the Kabbalistic arts, and he was willing to offer his services for a price" (Wecker 1-2). Therefore, the novel casts the shadow of immorality on the creation of life to control, use, and discard. Far from being a respected member of the Jewish community, he lives alone in isolation in a

"dilapidated shack, deep in the forest…The path to the front door was a half-trampled trail. Greasy, yellowish smoke drifted from a chimney-pipe, the only sign of habitation" (Wecker 2). This negative description of remoteness associated with the Schaalman echoes Baer's rendition of Gabirol as a Creator who "suffered from a severe skin disease that required him to isolate himself from other human beings," which is substantiated by Bashevis' rendition (Baer 20). Whereas this skin disease gave Gabirol a reason to remain in isolation, and somewhat excused his creation of the female Golem, Schaalman has no such disease. With this, Wecker intends to make readers uncomfortable with this isolation, rendering Schaalman abject. Wecker therefore illustrates her familiarity with a combination of Gabirol renditions but chooses not to mimic a specific retelling. While these undesirable qualities of Schaalman are delivered as the perceptions of his male client Rotfeld, who is far from a paragon of human virtue, Rotfeld's framing paints Schaalman as an outcast from the Jewish community. Consequently, the creation of Chava as a docile slave made "for the pleasures of a bed" by this man who is very clearly not G-d, but a man who does not even have G-d on his side, acts as a pointed critique from Wecker (2). Indeed, these makers follow formulas to create life much as a chemist does, but it is important to distinguish that these agents of creation do not have inherently godly or spiritual skill that allows them to divinely infuse life. Thus, Wecker uses Schaalman's abjection to interrogate the relationship between past creators of the Golem and divine authority.

Wecker also questions Schaalman's authority through the choice of his name, which literally translates to "creator of vessels." This is particularly symbolic in the context of *The Golem and the Jinni*, for Chava as female Golem epitomizes the "vessel." Primarily, golems are often perceived as empty vessels to control; however, women are also seen under patriarchal systems

as vessels, for misogynistic thought dictates that women have a passive role whose purpose is to act as vessels for male children. Likewise, Chava is racialized as a Golem, a species traditionally seen as distinct from and inferior to humans; she is also racialized as a Jewish woman. This is not unlike anti-Black racism, which is often "the process of imagining Black people as an empty vessel, a nonbeing, a nothing, an ontological zero" (Jackson 1). Thus, the symbol of the vessel is often one utilized to dehumanize the Other and to attempt to render them passive figures through the elision of race and species. The symbol of the vessel also functions as an alibi for exploitation. If a vessel is 'empty' why not use or fill it? If a land is not being 'used' by its inhabitants in ways which we recognize, why not take it? There exists a logic of exploitation latent in the framing as vessel that Wecker clearly links with the character of Schaalman as villain.

Wecker not only questions Schaalman as Creator but also Rotfeld as Master. Wecker nuances Rotfeld's character when he requests that Schaalman make his Golem wife dutiful, modest, and possessing "curiosity…and intelligence" (Wecker 4). While this may appear a progressive portrayal of Rotfeld, he only chooses to request these characteristics because they are those of his younger sister. So, the attributes belong to her subordination in his mind of a chaste woman. Rotfeld also desires Schaalman to "make her proper. Not…lascivious. A gentleman's wife" (Wecker 4). Thus, the attributes of curiosity and intelligence are expressly curtailed by the desire to circumscribe her sexuality. Regardless of motive, this request marks an enormous shift from the sexual fantasy of a silent but compliant woman in the previous female Golem myths. However, it is significant that Schaalman inwardly expresses doubt at this progress, "wonder[ing] if the man knew what he was asking for," which Wecker uses to further characterize him as a villain (Wecker 4). When Rotfeld dies after bringing the Golem to life, Wecker gives

readers an unprecedented case of a masterless female Golem. Until Wecker's rendition, "in the original conception the Golem came to life only while the ecstasy of his creator lasted" (Scholem 99). Since Wecker so clearly bases the foundation of her female Golem story on previous myths, it is interesting to reflect that if Rotfeld had not perished, Chava would have followed in this misogynist tradition of anticipating only the needs and wants of her master. Perhaps this deviation is not only a feminist commentary intended to empower Jewish women, but also a commentary on an antiquated view of marriage being replaced with a more egalitarian one.

Wecker's characterization and portrayal of Rotfeld as Master in dialogue with Chava's labor is Wecker's primary method of rewriting women's social roles. In *The Golem and the Jinni* when Rotfeld desires a female Golem, Wecker is clear that "[o]n top of his arrogant disposition, he was gangly and unattractive" (13). His disagreeable appearance and aggressive attitude do not characterize him as the hero of the story, as Wecker demonstrates how he only yearns for the female Golem because no woman wanted him in the first place. This condemnation of misogyny marks a huge turn from the previous Golem myths.[iv] Whereas this man would traditionally have been excused and his unhealthy sexual desires rationalized, Wecker instead advocates and empathizes with the female Golem. In addition, Wecker subverts the previous instances where the female Golem acted as a maid-servant, because the male authors thought of domestic menial labor as the only labor women were created to do. Wecker critiques the tasks of cleaning and housekeeping from the original myth where the female Golem functions as a maid-servant through Chava's housekeeping with Rabbi Meyer, acknowledging that housework is the only means at Chava's, and women's, disposal when they are effectively created for men and kept from the privileges of men.

Thus, Rabbi Meyer comes to share the role of Creator with Schaalman when Chava arrives in New York. Rabbi Meyer himself names the female Golem "Chava" (after his late grandmother),[v] which situates him to share the role of Creator with Rabbi Schaalman. Meyer as Creator not only names her but teaches her how to fit in with nineteenth-century American-Jewish society, making him responsible for much of her identity as a human and a woman. I contend that much of Chava's identity as a female Golem stems from her name, as it alludes to her vibrant energy. Chava's name, which is the Hebrew name of Eve, emphasizes her significance, humanity, and femininity as the "first woman" by situating her in a biblical context as a well-known female figure among monotheistic communities. Therefore, naming represents Chava's individuality as a woman by playing off of Eve's story within the biblical creation myth of Genesis.

While Chava's discomfort with domesticity, a woman's place in the American nineteenth century, separates her from her contemporaries, it mirrors Eve's discomfort within the Garden of Eden. Chava often remarks, in a somewhat plaintive, childlike manner, "But it's hard to sit still for so long!" (Wecker 53). While this restlessness could certainly represent a step in her journey of maturation from an innocent being to an adult, this ignores the value of her restlessness, disregarding it as a distasteful attribute. In effect, her tragedy is that she is a being who never tires, and nonetheless remains largely confined indoors. Since Chava's name translated from Hebrew means "life," Wecker implies that Chava is supposed to have this unique, overflowing energy. Indeed, to trap her in the confines of what society deems acceptable denies her path of personhood which is entirely her own individual narrative. In fact, Chava's buoyant nature and her lively spirit is appropriate for a woman who never sleeps.

Chava's anticipation, enthusiasm, and hope upon seeing the Statue of Liberty for the first time also points to the potential of the female Golem. Chava immediately feels kinship with this "constructed woman" (Wecker 15), which demonstrates how Chava's empathy is an aspect of her curiosity which yearns to know and understand everything and everyone. This curiosity is not human-centered and demonstrates how Chava had an enormous potential to discover and understand. It is significant that this profound and pervasive curiosity takes place between Rotfeld's death and Chava's meeting of Rabbi Meyer. This is the one time within the novel where Chava does not have a man guiding and directing her actions. Thus, Rabbi Meyer's education and socialization are a direct curtailment of Chava's potential as something beyond what Rotfeld originally wanted, "a gentleman's wife" (4).

It is consequently unsurprising that Chava is bored with what conventional society has to offer and wants *more*. Scholars Naomi Rosenblatt and Joshua Horowitz use a modern and feminist reading of the Bible to explain that the allure of the forbidden fruit to Eve in the Garden of Eden is potentially because "she's grown restless and bored in their sultry garden, where everything she needs grows on trees. The gate at the far edge of the garden calls to her and bids her imagine what lies beyond" (37). With this reading, it is possible to view Chava and Eve's restlessness in a broader sense of women attempting to leave domesticity and normality, searching for more meaning and purpose in their lives. Indeed, Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit demonstrates that she is "not content to blindly accept rules…she relinquishes a world of safety and security for knowledge and experience" (45). Like Eve, Chava's restlessness is indicative of her desire for freedom and autonomy. It is also relevant that Eve, like Chava the Golem, is a constructed woman. She was created, in the second version of the creation story, from Adam's

side (commonly translated as rib). Therefore, Eve and Chava are both invented women, made by and from men in different manners, both placed as not quite as human or important as their male counterparts.

Wecker similarly reworks gendered power dynamics by critiquing these societal conventions which limit women's autonomy. Chava's longing to walk outside at night directly defies social norms of the late nineteenth century, since women unchaperoned, particularly at night, were considered promiscuous, sinful women and at danger of being taken advantage of by men. Rabbi Meyer confirms that "[w]omen alone at night are assumed to be of poor moral character. You'd find yourself prey to unwanted advances, even violent behavior" (Wecker 54). It is certainly true that this was a common cultural conception; however, Chava's yearning to walk at night is analogous for her desire for freedom and self-determination. Therefore, it appears that Wecker condemns the limiting patriarchal structures of the time by giving her freedom of thought, which is unprecedented in Golem literature.

The moment in which Chava runs for the first time grants her agency and freedom in a similar manner. The specific language used depicts Chava as a bird flying for the first time and experiencing true freedom as "her legs stretched behind her, her cloak flowed outward like a wing, and for a long moment her body was a dark shape flying away from him [Ahmad] at an incredible speed" (Wecker 279). However, I am less interested by the freeing act of running, and running as a new way of experiencing life, and more by why Chava never ran before this moment. She was always physically capable of running, but unwritten social norms and pressures, while not explicitly forbidding, subtly discourage women from such activities. In fact, Chava's first response to Rabbi Meyer recognizing her as a golem is to run; however, he convinces her that it

would be improper, that “you can’t be wandering the streets like this” (Wecker 38). Chava’s reluctance to run demonstrates how constrained by a specific order of behavior Chava is.

This emphasis on controlling women’s bodies is because patriarchal thought ideally desires to control women’s minds. Chava’s limited worldview primarily results from the politics of Rabbi Meyer. Unlike the villainous, overtly misogynistic Rabbi Schaalman, Rabbi Meyer’s sexism is in the form of a well-meaning paternalism, whose subtlety is in ways more dangerous. In short, Meyer’s paternalism of allegedly wanting what is best for Chava, and thus forcing her to conform with his expectations, represents the epitome of western humanist thought. Regrettably, Chava continues to idealize him throughout the novel as “the wisest person I’ve ever met,” which legitimizes his paternalism (Wecker 241). It is thus significant that Chava meets Ahmad, a male Jinni, on the night of Rabbi Meyer’s death. Ahmad, who questions the institutions which oppress women’s freedom signifies a new stage in Chava’s life. When Ahmad remarks that there is nothing keeping Chava from walking alone at night, Chava immediately responds, “How could I go out alone, after dark? I would be noticed, an unaccompanied woman on the street” (Wecker 206). These words parrot precisely what Rabbi Meyer warned Chava against, demonstrating how assimilated Chava had become into patriarchal thought even after Rabbi Meyer’s death.

Wecker’s revision of gender norms is nevertheless particularly liberal, for she actively includes men within her feminism by deciding to split the perspective of the book between Chava and the Jinni, Ahmad. This deliberate choice to juxtapose a female Golem with a male Jinni demonstrates Wecker’s particular feminism and how it posits a relational matrix in dialogue with Ahmad’s character to reveal interests in the construction of masculinity. This gender theory,

based in the terms of relationality, explores not only women's experiences, but how men are also trapped inside these constructions of gender in a patriarchal system. This is physically represented within the narrative, for the Jinni's physically bound form offers an interesting parallel to how Chava feels metaphorically trapped throughout the novel (Wecker 27). The culmination of the novel, which reveals the Jinni's master to be the same as Chava's, strongly emphasizes how their enslavement and liberation, on physical and spiritual levels, have functioned in conjunction with one another. Indeed, Wecker seems to imply that one could not be completely free without the other's liberation, which asserts that men and women must collectively address and dismantle institutionalized patriarchal values together.

It is easy to dismiss Wecker's story as a typical love story where the woman needs a man; however, the Jinni's specific relationship with Chava begs more analysis. Indeed, the Jinni is the one being whose feelings Chava is unable to instinctively intuit. Unlike with anyone else, Chava does not feel oppressed by his needs and desires, genuinely enjoying spending time with him of her own volition. Finally, the Jinni understands her, sees her for who she truly is, does not try to change her, and loves her because, and not in spite, of her peculiarities. The envisioning of the Jinni and the Golem's relationship as being only able to exist through these conditions of equality displays Wecker's feminism and restructuring of masculinity.

Additionally, Wecker decenters anthropocentric thought by centering the novel around two non-human beings and redefining humanity and sentience beyond Western Enlightenment norms. Not only are both non-human beings; they are both magical beings from myths of Middle-Eastern origin. Thus, by deliberately selecting a Golem and a Jinni as protagonists, Wecker attempts to combat consideration of the "human" as a definitive and closed category,

"embrac[ing] nonanthropomorphic animal or technological Others, prompting a posthuman ethical turn" (Braidotti 29). While this may appear irrelevant to the feminism of the novels, it is important to remember that the questions we ask about animals such as questioning their souls, their emotions, and how we are ethically obligated to them have historically been asked about women by men. Indeed, the depictions of the female Golem seem to play out, in an exaggerated fashion, questions asked historically about women's being and experience of the world: How smart are they? Do they have the same kinds of souls as men? Are they fully human? Are they closer to nature? What is their experience of the world? These questions are made strange or defamiliarized for us as readers by Chava's status as a golem. It is because she is *not* simply an ordinary human woman that these questions about her role, desires, 'nature,' and treatment become so pointed and obvious to us.

Social expectations, shown particularly in *The Golem and the Jinni*, are a powerful shaping tool which forms how Chava recognizes her humanity. Chava's experience as an Eastern European Jewish woman in the United States communicates a broad stream of immigrant stories shaped by the transition to a new life. Chava's story illustrates the social power of gendered constructions and the sexed body. The way she is socialized is contingent on her being in a woman's body. The female body is the fundamental way in which a person is recruited into heteronormative feminine experience. The nature of women's experiences, Wecker suggests, is through embodiment, through the way the mere appearance of a female body is subsequently gendered by society. The status of one's being as mediated by bodily forms as women helps to investigate how women are expected to conform to human culture and feminine expectations.

While Wecker attempts to restructure a gendered hierarchy that places women in inferior positions, there are times within the novel when Wecker's feminism is limited. It is strange that Chava is created as a being whose "natural" instincts incline toward empathy and service, and there is little evidence of her curiosity and intelligence beyond the kinds of learning that correspond to the instinct for survival in the days between Rotfeld's death and her meeting Rabbi Meyer. Again, Rotfeld's death forced Chava to hear the desires of the people around her because "Without the benefit of the bond between master and Golem, their wishes and fears did not have the driving force of commands — but nonetheless she heard them, and felt their varying urgencies, and her limbs twitched with the compulsion to respond" (Wecker 12-13). The word choice here is interesting, since the word "benefit" does not indicate a feminist perspective on "masters" controlling women, and certainly not when the novel is written from the female Golem's perspective. In this case, it appears that the empathy which Chava experienced with Rotfeld, and subsequently with all humans, is a disadvantage.

Originally, Chava's empathy prompted her to comply with her master's orders, keeping in mind that her master never had any need to care for her desires or needs. Even though it appears that Chava is at an advantage with her superhuman power to read minds, Wecker, perhaps unintentionally, is placing Chava in a unique position where in a way all humans are her master. Chava perceives this as part of her nature, for "Golems are meant to be ruled by a master. A golem senses its master's thoughts, and responds to them without thinking. My own master is dead. But that ability didn't go away" (Wecker 207). However, these voices in her head are not in her control, and the quantity "nearly paralyzed her," which offers an interesting commentary on gender roles within the novel (Wecker 34). The fact that Chava has no choice in whether or

not she has this empathy implies that Wecker is forcing Chava into an empathetic role, which is traditionally thought of as a feminine quality. Nevertheless, the salient point is that Wecker does not seem to even consider that Chava's empathy could be used for her own ends. Why can her empathy not be shown as a way to manipulate people, for instance? Within the terms of the novel, presumably, it is because Chava has no self and no desires. But then why does Wecker not give her at least some rudimentary characteristic that might be the beginnings of a nascent selfhood? Instead, Chava's empathy causes her to instinctively attempt to nurture people, which puts her in a stereotypical feminine role, placing the needs of others before her own. Nevertheless, this empathy uncoincidentally reflects many of the specifications that Rotfeld initially requested for "his" female Golem, which begs the question of how much free will Chava has, in reality, throughout the novel. The overwhelming power of these emotions disables Chava. While this may appear merely a function of fantasy writing, this is only an exaggerated version of the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which women are expected to engage in caretaking of those around them all the time.

Furthermore, Chava acting as a maid for Rabbi Meyer is complex because it initially appears as an improvement from the ancient depictions where being forced into doing this menial labor is the female Golem's only purpose. Wecker is clearly playing off this original myth, so it is disappointing that Chava is brought to life to do housework, which reaffirms gender norms, rather than attempting to restructure them. Chava does affirm, "I like doing the work. It makes me feel better. And this way I can repay you for your generosity" (Wecker 50). Although Chava tells the Rabbi that she does this housework voluntarily, it seems that Wecker is merely placing the desire for housework onto women — not a materially meaningful difference from the original

Golem myth. It is also interesting that this conversation about labor comes directly after the scene where Chava describes how living in the same apartment as the Rabbi discomforts him. Because she knows that her presence discomforts him, she grows anxious trying to please him, which only makes the cycle worse. As contemporary readers, we understand that Chava immensely desires to please the rabbi and can sense what pleases or displeases him. Therefore, when Chava says that she likes doing the housework, it may not be because she genuinely enjoys this labor, but to comfort the Rabbi, making her feel better because she is conditioned to obey the commands in her head. Thus, even though Wecker attempted in this scene to modernize the original female Golem myth in a more feminist manner, it fails to a certain extent, ironically, because of Chava's empathy. While the means differ, the outcome is still a female Golem as a servant to the males in her life.

Finally, the possibility of Jewish women's education is ignored in this novel, for Chava does not enjoy learning or reading. That is not to say that intellectualism or education is the only way to advance as a human, but in ignoring this entire sphere of education, Wecker indirectly implies that a woman's place is not in learning. Even though it is allegedly because of Chava's restiveness, it does not alter the end result, which endorses the gender roles of the time. This bias is only furthered by the Rabbi's internal comment that his hope for Chava reading "was too much to ask of her. Her nature wouldn't allow it" (Wecker 53). It is unclear whether Rabbi Meyer is referring to her nature as a Golem or her nature as a woman. Nevertheless, because Wecker's novel aligns the two in her interrogation of gender roles, it does not matter.

In examining the ways that the novel both succeeds and is somewhat limited in its feminist myth-making, I am interested in how this indicates the tenacity of Eurocentric

anthropocentrism and the patriarchal, sexist, and racist structures it entails. This intersection of the post-humanist and feminism shows how authorial feminist intention can be limited by the source material. The work discussed not only reflects the evolving attitudes towards women, but also how the idea of sentience has resisted an older, patriarchal version of the Golem. Instead of giving life and taking life haphazardly, the metaphysics have been rethought. Thus, Wecker plays a large role as a literary scholar and popular author in rethinking what makes someone or something human. By imaging beings who are fashioned from earth and yet develop the sentience and personhood attributed uniquely to human beings (within anthropocentric thought) to stand in for the lesser, second-class status of women, Wecker exposes the male-centered conception of what counts as "human." Thereby, she rejects the logic of dominance and subordination of women. Our typical assumptions about the 'givenness' of what counts as human experience, especially via women, is what is at stake in these depictions.

However, the notion of the "human" is already problematic. For their Golems to be accepted as a "human" may be a backward step, as it does not challenge the essential stability of the category. As posthumanist scholars such as Braidotti, Jackson, and others have shown, it is necessary to question "human" as a category, and to recognize the hierarchical designation for humanity on which humanist thought bases itself. The necessary step to break down the category of the human to dismantle the hierarchies of gender and race it entails is evident in the terms through which Wecker grants her Golem human status. Wecker implies that the way to be accepted as a human is to go through gender — to align their sentience and their self-awareness with gendered personhood. Since Chava is a female Golem, the necessity for her to act as a "normal" human woman involves performing feminine tasks and behaving in ways sanctioned as

part of womanhood. This does not mean that she needs to think and feel as a feminine being. Therefore, it would be possible for Wecker to write Chava as human by virtue of being at odds with her feminine roles. Instead, the female Golem succeeds at assimilating as human only by affirming the essentially separate nature of women and men and thereby reinstituting the very essentialist and hierarchical logic embedded in male-dominated human exceptionalism.

Wecker's notions of personhood and sentience are directly rooted to humanist thought. Chava is sentient, but in the more traditional, Enlightenment sense of being rational and cognizant. Schaalman explains that "it would need some amount of self-awareness, if only enough to converse" (Wecker 2). This is curious in a variety of ways, since the original Golem never had the power of speech — it therefore appears that Chava's speech is necessary to fulfill her wifely duties. Chava does not actually need the power of speech to voice her own thoughts, but more to be like the mythical Echo,[vi] who merely repeats what has been said. Wecker exposes Schaalman and Rotfeld's narcissism in this manner: their goal of female subordination necessitates speech, even if in reality they do not want speech from her, but a sounding board. This mirroring of male desire is particularly relevant in the context of Chava's later marriage to Rabbi Meyer's nephew Michael, where she fulfills the stereotypically feminine role of an assistant, helper to her male superior. Since this marriage was also what Rabbi Meyer envisioned, and what Rotfeld wanted in a female Golem, it is productive to question how the desires of the creators have predestined the lives of these female Golems.

While Wecker grants sentience as a consequence of existence after the official act of creation, it may be necessary to question when this sentience occurs, in reality, and if perhaps we as humans are limited in how we conceive of sentience. Posthumanists have argued that all

living matter “is intelligent and self-organizing, but this does not in itself resolve or improve the power differences at work in the material world” (Braidotti 34). Posthumanist thought, particularly that concerned with the human-animal distinction, might use the Golem’s sentience to challenge the limits of humanism. The female Golem therefore has the potential to reframe gender, race, life, and being in a manner that creates new identities outside of a patriarchal, hierarchical, anthropocentric system.

For instance, animal studies scholar Gary Varner delineates that sentience relates to “animals of a given species” (3). However, species categorization based on an inherent hierarchy risks generalization, for it “anchor[s] all of the more and less elaborate taxonomic systems that have been devised to arrange, organize, and explain the diversity and number of kinds of living organisms” (Ritvo 2). The assumption of species as a solely biological entity comprised of “groups of organisms that can produce fertile offspring” is especially problematic in regard to the female Golem, for they are artificially made beings who cannot reproduce (Ritvo 3). This also limits the purpose of females to merely giving birth.

The false binary of “wild” and “domesticated” has also often been utilized to categorize non-humans (Ritvo 4). The journey of Chava from a newly born female Golem to a cultured, sophisticated woman at the end of *The Golem and the Jinni* represents how Wecker “domesticates” her into a stereotypically female role. Domestication is therefore a literal and metaphysical cage which exists to control the “wild” elements of society. This behavioral dimension of categorization demonstrates how species is a problematic category for it justifies the forced control and the exoticization of the wild Other. Additionally, species as a category is purely concerned with the biological — the Golem puts these categorizations into disarray, since

she is artificial and not biological. Thus, the Golem as a figure has huge potential to upset the category of species, as well as the animal and human distinction.

Through this lens of "wild" versus "domesticated" it is also worth considering the male Golem from earlier renditions of the tale who "run amok," causing their imminent, and to an extent, predestined death. The male Golem, traditionally employed by holy Jewish men to protect the Jewish community from persecution, occasionally does his duty by spying for rabbis, but usually the Golem exists to provide physical strength to protect the Jewish people. Thus, it is acceptable for the Golem to rampage and destroy, as long as it is in the name of protection, and under the direct control and supervision of powerful men. It is only when the Golem does this preemptively, and without the express permission of his "master" that he becomes a threat. It is therefore necessary to consider how power, or lack thereof, of human men determines the fate of non-humans. It is the anthropocentric quality of these Golem stories that justifies the violence on behalf of the dominant, ruling force and "privileges the perspectives of humans over nonhuman animals" (Probyn-Rapsey 11). However, the principal anxiety which permeates all Golem texts, and justifies the murder of Golems, is one of anxiety concerning the hazy boundary between humans and non-humans. Since Golems traditionally look exactly like humans, it makes it extremely difficult to differentiate them and categorize them under humanist thought, especially in the cases of Wecker's Golem who can speak like humans.

The Golem is a threat to the security of the human, for as they develop consciousness, they challenge humans to reflect on personhood as not an exclusive category for humans, but to encompass all living, sentient beings. Ideally, the status of personhood would not matter, for non-persons would not be discriminated against and all beings would be respected. However, it

is essential to acknowledge the importance of personhood, for the denial of personhood rationalizes slavery and subjugation of those not deemed people, such as in the case of Solomon ibn Gabirol and the female Golem. Moreover, the term 'personhood' does not necessarily have to promote anthropocentric thought. In *The Amber Spyglass*, Dr. Mary Malone's encounter with the mulefa, beings who have trunks like elephants and claws, leads to a revision of her previous humanist attitude, for "she found an adjustment being made in her mind, as the word *creatures* became the word *people*. These beings weren't *human*, but they were *people*" (Pullman 123). Thus, recognition of personhood does not automatically equate to legitimizing the category of the human. The Jinni Ahmad's first reaction to meeting Chava in *The Golem and the Jinni* is "You're not human. You're made of earth" (Wecker 173). As a non-human himself, he does not deny her personhood even though he identifies her as a non-human. But just as there is an imperative need to expand the definition of personhood, the female Golem also makes it essential to broaden and rethink our conceptions of gender and Jewishness. The Golem as a potentially posthumanist figure also transcends the humanist assumptions about human and non-human animal consciousness and souls, as the Golem's near-humanness but not-quite-human and not-quite-animal status could be used to push against the dominant cultural construction of "the Human."

Theoretically, the female Golem as an idea and myth provides an occasion for feminist interventions that step beyond human exceptionalism. The Golem, as a being, is a figure for women and racialized others because its appearance as human is attended by and even necessitates measurements of inferiority that place it on the human-animal continuum. The female Golem especially offers the image of a posthuman person who forces us to rethink the

measurements of sentience and personhood. Wecker questions the status of women through explorations of the potential of the female, which allows her to challenge the category of the human as limited by male-centered definitions and to rethink our definition of humanity in order to include women's experiences. However, we should be asking why Chava barely makes the cut. Wecker deems Chava worthy of dignity by classifying her as a human, but Chava already merits respect and personhood for being a golem. My critique mainly focuses on the ending of the novel, and how Chava loses her sense of identity by assimilating to become human and "domesticated" as a woman at the end.[vii] Fantasy has the freedom and flexibility to render this ending unnecessary. Chava should not have been forced to conform to human etiquette, especially given the radical potential of the figure of the Golem and the genre of fantasy. It would have been significantly easier and societally acceptable to position and realize the Golem as a posthuman person who rewrites the terms of sentience and personhood to liberate women. Especially because the Golem is neither human nor animal, the lack of clarity in categorization presents an ideal opportunity to discuss the gender imperative of the boundary that separates humans and non-humans.

Anxieties surrounding the female Golem offer a productive opportunity to study the fear of an ambiguous boundary between humans and non-humans. This anxiety also has racial overtones, for there exists a fear of the Golem as a super race who could dominate regular humans with their physical strength and their superiority. On one hand, Golems are below humans, as they cannot speak the human language, making them appear less intelligent than humans. It is also comforting for audiences to conceive of Golems as mindless earth, for if the physical strength of the Golem is already terrifying to audiences, one could only imagine how the

acknowledgement of mental strength would exacerbate these anxieties. Regardless, the Golem is traditionally thought of as physically superior[viii] but mentally inferior. This is quite similar to the seemingly paradoxical manner of thinking of Blackness, which is "produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where form shall not hold: potentially 'everything and nothing' at the register of ontology" (Jackson 3). In other words, the contradictory anxieties concerning race, which simultaneously assume the lesser intelligence but superior strength of Blacks is applicable to the prejudicial treatment of the figure of the Golem. In the case of Wecker, the racialization of Golems also pertains to the racialization as Jews, perceived in anti-Semitic thought as a threat due to their allegedly superior financial power but concurrently inferior due to their physical repulsiveness.[ix] The treatment of Golems thus reflects anxieties over mixed races and acts as a metaphor for racism and anti-Semitism. This conversation opens up a further direction for the analysis of the Golem.

Ultimately, there never was "a human" — it was always a male, Christian, white subject as "human" (Braidotti 23). It is not that we should expand our definition of the human, but that we should get rid of this category all together. While Wecker has opened up a whole new, feminist, and fascinating manner of conceiving of the female Golem, her work also demonstrates the necessity of posthumanist perspectives for feminist projects. In transcending the anthropocentrism that defines the cultural constructs of sentience and species, the Golem also has the potential to break through the sex, gender, and race binaries that are entailed in Enlightenment humanism. The Golem is thus an essential figure in disrupting binary thinking through the process of "becoming." The Golem illustrates how everyone has the potential of

endless becoming that extends beyond the boundaries of Western Enlightenment's narrow definition of "the human."

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[i] Frischer, Rita Berman. "Jane Yolen." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 27 February 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on April 20, 2021) <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/yolen-jane>.

[ii] Such as Madeline Miller's *Circe*, Marissa Meyer's *Heartless*, and Sarah Henning's *Sea Witch.*

[iii] For more on Solomon ibn Gabirol's influence on the Golem myth, see my chapter "The Literary History of the Female Golem" from my Bachelor of Philosophy thesis *Creations, Names, and Life: Humanity and Femininity in the Female Golem Myth*. Creations, names, and life: humanity and femininity in the female Golem myth - D-Scholarship@Pitt

[iv] For more on previous female Golem myths, specifically the infamous myth of Solomon ibn Gabirol's female golem, see Ausubel, Nathan. *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People*. New York, Crown Publishers, 1948. And Singer, Isaac Bashevis. "The Golem Is a Myth for Our Time." *The New York Times*, 12 Aug. 1984. *The Times Digital Archive*.

[v] This is also potentially because Rabbi Meir was the principal rabbi to comment on Adam as Golem in Sanhedrin 38b (The William Davidson Talmud. Sefaria; www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.38b?lang=bi.).

[vi] For more on Echo and women, see Greer, Margaret R. "Tragic Resonance: Listening for Women's Voices in the Myth of Echo and Narcissus." *Bulletin of the Comediantes*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2020, pp. 73–101. *EBSCOhost*.

[vii] Chava's assimilation to a Jewish human woman at the end of *The Golem and the Jinni* will certainly be complicated by the upcoming sequel *The Hidden Palace*, which will be available in June 2021.

[viii] The anti-Semitic myth of superior Jewish financial power expands this conception of threatening power.

[ix] See Bytwerk, Randall L., translator. "Der Jude als Weltparasit" ["The Jew as World Parasite"]. *German Propaganda Archive*, Calvin University, research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/weltparasit.htm.