

A Trans, Autistic, and Neurogender Jewish Monster: The Story of the Golem

Dean Leetal (they/ze)

Kibbutzim College

Abstract: This critical commentary revisits the Jewish story of the Golem and reads it as a transgender text. Some say that the Golem inspired Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, a story famously interpreted by Susan Stryker as an allegory for her own trans experience: living on the edge of society, her humanity debated, defined by a morally questionable medical establishment. But there are important differences between Frankenstein and the Golem. The Golem is brought to life through language, particularly the Hebrew word 'emet,' and is an animated clay tasked with protecting Jewish marginalized communities. Today, questions of language and truth are at the center of many debates regarding the validity and nature of transgender people. The concept of protecting marginalized communities, even while being rejected from them, is also painfully relevant. Unlike Frankenstein, though, the Golem is nonverbal, which is linked to autism. Thus, I argue that a neurogender analysis of their story that accounts for both gender and neurodivergence is critical. This reading focuses on these points of relation and what they may bring to light.

As legend has it, the Jewish community of sixteenth-century Prague was hounded by a particular antisemitic priest, Tadeusz, who often concocted plots to harm them.¹ Sometimes he used his social power, and other times he would manipulate the judicial system to frame innocent Jewish people.² Once, he convinced a Jewish girl to meet him in secret, kidnapped her, and then kept her locked up in his house. He hoped to convert her to Christianity and marry her off to a Christian man.³ But the groom selected by the priest, who knew nothing of her captivity, truly loved her. He even gave her a ring, which she kept close.⁴ Worried and upset, the girl's parents begged the great Rabbi Maharal for help. Unbeknown to them, Maharal had a secret: one of those in his employ at the temple was not a regular human, but a Golem he had brought to life. The Rabbi pretended to refuse helping the girl's parents in public, but, in secret, called them to meet, made some inquiries and investigations, and devised a plan. He gave the Golem a talisman that enabled it to become invisible and explained to the Golem how to sneak into the priest's house undetected. The Golem waited hours for the right moment to get inside and sneak her out. The Rabbi then faked the girl's death, and, once they were all reunited, the girl's parents took her and fled the area immediately.

The mourning groom found solace in study. He learned more and more, and his studies led him towards Judaism. Eventually, he converted and became respected as a Jewish student.⁵ With time, he was to seek a new wife with the help of a matchmaker. The matchmaker suggested a young

¹ Ali Yasif and Yehuda Rosenberg. הגולם מפראג ומעשים נפלאים אחרים [The Golem of Prague and other Wondrous Actions]. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, (1991), 89.

² Ibid., 108.

³ Ibid., 93.

⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁵ Ibid.

woman whom he felt as if he'd known before; she even had his ring.⁶ The two had a happy wedding, and everyone lived happily ever after, except for the thwarted evil priest. Unknown to the story, however, is the happiness of the Golem.

This critical commentary reads this Jewish legend as a transgender text. According to Hillel J. Kieval, the Golem inspired Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.⁷ Stories of the Golem appear in various Jewish cultures and communities over centuries; in some stories as a servant, pseudo-wife, or even cattle, and in others, as the protector of marginalized Jewish people and communities.⁸ This paper focuses on one iteration of the Golem legend written by Rabbi Yehuda Rosenberg in *Nifle'ot Maharal* 1909.⁹ Almost as soon as this book was published, there was controversy; some believed that it was a historical account, while others did not.¹⁰ There have been compelling arguments against reading *Nifle'ot Maharal* as a historical account, but debates on its historicity are not the purpose of this paper. This paper treats it only as a literary text.

The story is about a sixteenth-century Rabbi named Judah Loew ben Bezalel, or as he is known, Maharal, a well-known historical figure in many Jewish cultures. In Rosenberg's iteration of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hillel J. Kieval, "Pursuing the Golem of Prague: Jewish culture and the invention of a tradition," *Modern Judaism* 17, no. 1 (1997): 2.

⁸ Edan Dekel and David Gantt Gurley, "How the Golem Came to Prague," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 103, no.2 (2013): 242; Eli Eshed, "גולם למניין חלק א'" [*Golem La'Minyan (Part I)*]," *האייל הקורא* [The Calling Reindeer], August 31, 2000; Aryeh Maidenbaum, "The Golem of Prague: An Archetype," *Psychological Perspectives* 64, no. 2 (2021): 201-210.

⁹ Yasif and Rosenberg.

¹⁰ Eshed.

the legend, Maharal secretly takes his son-in-law and another scholar to the river. There, Maharal gathers clay and creates the shape of a human. Together, they use sacred words combined with magic to bring the figure, the Golem, to life.¹¹ The Rabbi then brings the Golem into his home and gives him a job at the temple. He tells everyone that the Golem was just a person that he met, felt sorry for, and took in. What nobody knows is that the Rabbi and the Golem secretly work to protect the Jewish community.

A Trans, Autistic, and Neurogender Jewish Monster

This paper reads the Golem as trans, as well as autistic and neurogender. One might wonder about the validity of using such words to discuss works and characters created before they existed. Sawyer Kemp discusses the anachronism of using contemporary words to describe those living in social structures that have significantly changed.¹² Discussing Shakespearean productions that frame characters as trans, Kemp comments that, as people abandon (currently harmful) Shakespearean era words for gender nonconforming such as ‘transvestite’ and ‘hermaphrodite,’ it is worth pausing to try to sort out exactly what the connection is (or might potentially be) between Shakespeare and contemporary social justice movements.¹³ As they explain, social structures have changed meaningfully since Shakespearean times, and these words and social concepts exist in the context of society. Thus, while using such words may be useful politically, one should make sure it

¹¹ Yasif and Rosenberg, 76.

¹² Sawyer K. Kemp, “‘In That Dimension Grossly Clad’: Transgender Rhetoric, Representation, and Shakespeare,” *Shakespeare Studies* 47 (2019): 120-26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 121.

actually is useful in every specific case. As Kemp puts it: “If we are going to visit the past to serve the present, it should actually and meaningfully serve those populations whose language, identities, and communities we are borrowing.”¹⁴ I agree that this needs to be taken into account. Social structures regarding transgender people have changed, as have a lot of other social structures. But no one seems to object to reading Dr. Frankenstein as a man, or even reading Mary Shelley as a woman, despite these words having different meanings today. Juno Richards states that while words and concepts do not capture the truth of the past, using them may be about the present, about living people and movements.¹⁵ Kemp seems to partially agree, yet cautions that one must not assume every reading does in fact benefit marginalized people. The editors of *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern* suggest that both ahistorical and historical approaches can exist alongside one another. They suggest that caring for current transgender people and that discussion of historically marginalized genders beyond language are both important. Although I understand the aforementioned scholars’ hesitation to use modern-day words in the past, I argue that applying the lenses of trans and autism can serve important purposes for trans and autistic people today.

Another issue one should consider is that the notion of “trans” or “transgender” is often understood through limiting conceptualizations popular in the field of transgender studies. This may make trans readings inaccurate, if not appropriative of gender experiences of people marginalized in other ways. Scholars such as Gayle Salamon demonstrate that current understandings of the

¹⁴ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵ Juno Richards, “Claude Cahun’s Pronouns,” *Visualities*, April 29, 2021.

separation between gender and embodiment are not always relevant to the types of oppression society links with gender.¹⁶ Jenny C. Mann shows that this is true of historical research as well.¹⁷ C. Riley Snorton and Abdulhamit Arvas also demonstrate that, in at least some cases, gender identity is inseparable from race and time.¹⁸ Similarly, and as will be key for my analysis, M. Remi Yergeau explains that neurodiversity and gender are inseparable for some people as well.¹⁹ Yergeau uses the term “neurogender” to discuss lived experiences and identities that are an inseparable mix of neurodivergence and gender. For example, some autistic people feel disconnected from social structures such as gender, and their lack of gender comes from this experience of society. These identities and experiences are erased by the notion that neurotype and gender are disparate. In an introduction to their special issue on Colonial Unknowing, the editors link transgender and disability studies. They point out the potential of putting into question the fictional stability of categories through multiplicity.²⁰ Perhaps this may be achieved through use of intersectional identities, or identities that take into account multiple social positionings. Stephanie Burt

¹⁶ Gayle Salamon, *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

¹⁷ Jenny C. Mann, “How to Look at a Hermaphrodite in Early Modern England,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 46, no. 1 (2006).

¹⁸ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Abdulhamit Arvas, “Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 116-36.

¹⁹ M. Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing,” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016):

suggests that some authors may be read as trans, not in the sense that they identified as transgender, but in the sense that themes of their work may strongly resonate with transgender people.²¹ I argue that this may work specifically for reading characters who are marginalized in the above ways, such as neurogender people.

Alexander Eastwood and Burt suggest trans readings do not have to mean literally deciding whether a person or character is trans; rather, they can be based on being trans in characteristics, as identified by trans people today.²² A trans person may find a story resonates with them regardless of the author's intent, identity, or environment. Such readings provide a liminal space for creativity, intuition, and art. These readings enable one to side-step the discussion of unknowable questions and refocus on the trans reading itself. At the same time, they require attention so that one does not appropriate cultures or figures of marginalized groups to which one does not belong. For example, a non-autistic reader may identify with a story about disability through shared experiences of marginalization, while inadvertently erasing the disability aspects it gives voice to. Similar to the history of "trans," scholars such as Val Cumine, Julia Dunlop, and Gill Stevenson assert that autism has existed throughout time, but has only been given a name in the past century.²³ As Sarah Pripas-Kapit and Martin Stepney explain, autistic texts written by autistic people only started being

²¹ Stephanie Burt, "Twitter Stevens, Tumblr Stevens, Trans Stevens," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 46, no. 1 (2022).

²² Alexander Eastwood, "How, Then, Might the Transsexual Read?: Notes toward a Trans Literary History," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 590-604.

²³ Val Cumine, Julia Dunlop, and Gill Stevenson, *Autism in the Early Years: A Practical Guide* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

recognized in the early 1990s, and as such, one might implement a structure similar to the one Eastwood and Burt apply to trans people for the exploration of historical autism.²⁴ I argue that the Golem may be recognized now by autistic people as one of us regardless of the authors' intent and of the social structures prominent at the time of writing.

Following these scholarly arguments, my next two sections will argue exactly how the Golem is autistic and then trans. Since the story is, at least in this one case, a work of fiction, there is not one truth about the character. As such, this statement holds as much truth as non-trans readings. However, asserting that the Golem is trans and autistic holds significant meaning for readers who are as well. Trans people are continuously learning how to be our genders. This is particularly true for trans people outside of the gender binary, and those of us who are marginalized in more ways than one. This story may contribute something to a neurogender Jewish reader and uplift them. It may allow them to reclaim a piece of their heritage that may otherwise be erased.

The Golem as Autistic

The Golem can be read not only as trans but, as framed by the Rabbi, autistic as well. Unlike *Frankenstein's* Monster, the Golem looks like a non-Golem human.²⁵ There is only one difference: the

²⁴ Sarah Pripas-Kapit, "Historicizing Jim Sinclair's 'Don't mourn for us': A cultural and intellectual history of neurodiversity's first manifesto," in *Autistic Community and the Neurodiversity Movement: Stories from the Frontline*, ed. Steven K. Kapp (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 23-39; Martin Stepney, "The Evolution of Autism in Education," *Making Waves in Education* (2008): 163.

²⁵ Norma Rowen, "The Making of Frankenstein's Monster," in *State of the*

Golem “doesn’t talk,” at least not in the hegemonic sense. As discussed by Victor Román Mendoza, the very act of talking can be dangerous to transgender people, who may opt for not speaking.²⁶ Being nonverbal is also a common autistic trait and is linked with other disabilities as well. As Rosenberg explains, the Rabbi tells people that the Golem is a poor and mute man that the Rabbi met and took pity upon. The Golem is created for a life somewhat removed from society, where he is not quite at home. This is an existence that not only transgender people, but some autistic people would relate with.²⁷ As Koppers puts it, “There is not even enough cultural visibility that would allow many of us to form chosen families, chosen affinities.”²⁸ Trans bodies, Susan Stryker explains, are perceived as “less than fully human.”²⁹ Some Jewish scholars have suggested that Golems cannot be human, and therefore cannot be Jewish, because they do not speak.³⁰ Other Jewish scholars have strongly negated these notions. I want to join them and link this

Fantastic: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Fantastic Literature and Film, ed. Nicholas Ruddick (Westport: Greenwood, 1992), 169-77.

²⁶ Victor Román Mendoza, *Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance, and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899-1913* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

²⁷ James Berger, *The Disarticulate: Language, Disability, and the Narratives of Modernity*. New York: New York University Press, 2014.

²⁸ Petra Koppers, “Crip/Mad Archive Dances: Arts-Based Methods in and out of the Archive,” *Theater* 52, no. 2 (2022): 93.

²⁹ Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): 245.

³⁰ Eshed. Like many nonverbal autistic people, the Golem communicates in ways other than standard speech. The Golem reads and writes, and is able to communicate with animals and possibly divinity. Framing this as an inability to communicate is quite inaccurate.

idea to ableism, specifically.

In this context, the Golem may best be described as neurogender, someone whose neurodivergence and gender are inseparable. Yergeau, one of the creators of the word, writes, “Given autism’s particular threats to social orders, autism’s queerity is often storied by means of disorientation: Autistics are so rhetorically impaired that they remain unoriented toward all that is normative and proper, whether empathy or eros or gender (performance and concept unto itself).”³¹ And indeed, as discussed, many scholars have framed Golems through ‘othering’ them as being neither human nor Jewish. Philosophers from the sixteenth century onwards have even discussed whether killing the Golem is acceptable. Some compared it to children, autistic people, and animals, concluding that killing the Golem is permissible.³² In a discussion of whether sex with a Golem would be permissible, Eshed suggests most agree that a human man may penetrate a “female Golem,” but a “male Golem” may not penetrate a human woman.³³ Eshed does not discuss queerness, or the obvious questions about the status of Golems who do not fit the gender binary (if any do). Eshed brings up the question of whether Golems be allowed to marry Jewish men, and what the status of their children would be. Ada Smailbegović suggests that in some of Gertrude Stein’s work, humans use non-human animals to establish their identity as human through othering and differentiation. Animals, at the same time, did not necessarily need humans to know themselves.³⁴ Similarly, while

³¹ Yergeau, 27

³² Eshed; Dekel and Gurley.

³³ Eshed.

³⁴ Ada Smailbegović, “Of Poodles, Mockingbirds, and Beetles: Gertrude Stein’s Zoopoetics,” *College Literature* 46, no. 1 (2019).

human scholars debate the nature of humanity against the question of the Golem's Jewish potential, the Golem does not seem to be haunted by such questions. Whether we consider the Golem a literal animal — as some Golems are considered in other texts — or focus on their status as “different from human,” it is clear the Golem is the Other in this comparison.

This Otherness is, unfortunately, common in the experiences of autistic people. Indeed, The Rabbi himself introduces the Golem to their community as “חסר חכמה ובינה,” “אלם,” “תם” – “mute”, “innocent” and “lacking brains and wisdom.”³⁵ These are all stereotypes of autistic people.³⁶ The Rabbi's portrayal of the Golem as autistic to the community, along with the Golem's inability to talk, and social position as anormative in some illusive way, make reading the Golem as autistic an obvious choice.

The Golem displays another autistic stereotype: rigid and straightforward following of rules.³⁷ In one of the stories in the book, the Rabbi's wife orders the Golem to fetch water, and never orders it to stop, resulting in a flood. This is an example of the Golem's rigid approach toward rules. In all of the stories in the book, the Golem follows orders without questioning them, dedicated and straightforward.

The Golem is involved in another dynamic many autistics unfortunately experience: multiple marginalization. As Yergeau explains, “autistic politics routinely reward those who are multiply privileged.”³⁸ In other words, there is multiple discrimination of

³⁵ Ali Yasif and Yehuda Rosenberg, הגולם מפראג ומעשים נפלאים אחרים [The Golem of Prague and other Wondrous Actions] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1991), 18.

³⁶ Yergeau, 12-13.

³⁷ Ibid., 12.

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

those who are multiply marginalized. Within the marginalized Jewish community, the Golem is further marginalized as neurogender, an unfortunately common problem.³⁹ Stryker talks about how trans people are marginalized within their community; for example, she discusses how queer and feminist communities are often cruel and even dangerous towards trans people.⁴⁰ Stryker suggests following the Monster's reaction to oppression: rage. I want to follow Stryker here and assert that neurogender people deserve to claim monstrosity, too, in all of its subversive and fierce beauty.

The Golem, however, takes more of an assimilatory approach and protects the community that rejects them. The Golem works time and again, often putting herself in danger to defend a thankless community. The Rabbi may take credit for some of the achievements, but the Golem generally does not. Transgender and autistic people, particularly those who are multiply marginalized, are often treated similarly. As a neurogender being, the Golem must be used to the Rabbi exploiting its labor completely uncritically. In conclusion, the Golem seems to be positioned in her community as autistic, as well as possessing characteristics linked with autism.

The Golem as Trans

In Susan Stryker's 1994 "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix," she discusses identifying with Frankenstein's Monster as a transgender woman. She reads the Monster as trans and calls trans people to embrace their rage against

³⁹ Dara Z. Strolovitch, *Affirmative advocacy: Race, class, and gender in interest group politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁴⁰ Stryker, 239-240.

a society that oppresses them and to take on the mantle of Monster. It is worth discussing the similarities and differences between Stryker's reading of Frankenstein and my reading of the story of the Golem. As Rowen describes it, had Frankenstein's Monster been aware of sources other than the Christian world of its birth, it might not have felt so alone with the Golem for company.⁴¹ As a Jewish, neurodivergent genderqueer person, I might have felt less alone with the Golem as well. The following sections will relate the Golem to three components of trans experience: embodiment, language, and truth.

Embodiment

Embodiment is a ubiquitous question when it comes to gender, and the Golem is no exception. The Golem, like many neurogender people, was brought into embodiment fully formed as neurogender. Another way some trans people experience themselves is described by Stryker. Stryker explains the similarity between the way that Frankenstein's Monster and herself as a trans woman were brought into embodiment: both were done by a cisgender man who was powerful in his community, a doctor who did it for his career, not for their wellbeing.⁴² This can also be true of the Golem. While the Rabbi who creates the Golem's embodiment is marginalized as Jewish, he is a well-respected and powerful person in his community. The Golem is brought into its embodiment to serve the Rabbi's agendas and the Jewish community, where it is not quite a member. The Rabbi also assigned

⁴¹ Rowen.

⁴² Stryker, 242.

the Golem's gender, never asking the Golem's opinion. Therefore, in this paper, the Golem receives various pronouns.

We are never told the Golem's opinion regarding the form chosen for her. Maybe the Golem has other things that she might prefer doing, instead of being a secret superhero and working in the temple. Maybe the Golem liked being clay, being part of the river. The ever-shifting embodiment of being a river seems potentially very appealing, particularly for some nonbinary people. It may be pleasant and affirming to have a literally fluid embodiment, changing matter and shape, having small creatures move in and out of one's being, and taking shape anew time and again.

It may be interesting to note that object personification - considering objects to have needs or feelings - is a common experience for a lot of autistic people.⁴³ This is a little-discussed aspect of being neurogender, because some objects are gendered, but many are not. If one's gender is river mud that probably means they are outside the gender binary. Golem, here, is an object, and can be identified with.

Language

Another similarity between trans people and the Golem is the importance of language. Language is regularly used to validate or to harm trans people. For example, microlabels such as demigender and agender may be the validation a person needs, but these labels are often mocked or erased. Another example of the

⁴³ Nathan Caruana, Rebekah C. White, and Anna Remington, "Autistic traits and loneliness in autism are associated with increased tendencies to anthropomorphise," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology* 74, no. 7 (2021): 1295-1304.

importance of language for trans people is using correct pronouns, refusing to use them, or mocking the concept of pronouns. Quatrini discusses the language choices in some transphobic tweets: "Public opinions used by people in a position of power may pose a contributing factor in social injustice matters that can lead to language evolution and how language itself may be shaped to adapt to a certain social phenomenon."⁴⁴ As Andrey Uspenskiy explains, power is mostly used to harm those already marginalized.⁴⁵

The Golem and Frankenstein's Monster seem to have similar struggles. Susan Wolfson discusses Frankenstein's endeavor to learn human language in hopes that it will encourage normative humans to consider him with compassion.⁴⁶ Stryker discusses the lack of language for a body that transitioned.⁴⁷ Stryker explains that both she and Frankenstein's monster do not have words to talk about the journey that they have made. There had not been words in the English language or in human language for having had such a different embodiment like theirs. Like the Monster, the Golem must not have had words to discuss the significant change ze had been through. Had the Golem ever learned to speak human language like the Monster, what words would be able to describe zir lived experience? Being brought into humanoid form after having an embodiment always shifting and flowing, part of a different system

⁴⁴ Amerigo Quatrini, "On JK Rowling's Discourse on Transsexual Issues, An Analysis of the Language Used on Rowling's Twitter and the Sociolinguistic Implication of Hate Speech," *International Journal of Languages, Literature and Linguistics* 8, no. 2 (2022): 97.

⁴⁵ Andrey Uspenskiy, "Wumben, Wimpund, Woomud: An Exploration of Social Censure in the Internet Age," *The Morningside Review* 18 (2022): 25-33.

⁴⁶ Susan J. Wolfson, "Frankenstein's Origin-Stories," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 83, no. 4 (2020): 687.

⁴⁷ Stryker, 240-41.

of nature. Taking into consideration the Golem's past forms of communication is also meaningful in this context. Supporting animals' treading feet, being drank, cuddled, used for protection and as a home, are ways that part of a river may interact. They may be more significant or meaningful than human language. Joy Ladin, following Rabbi Maimonides, suggests that human language is not useful for discussing the Lord – in some ways similar to how language cannot sufficiently discuss Ladin's gender and experience. Human – or cisgender – languages are intrinsically based on the experiences and understanding of the speakers, who do not understand experiences other than their own. Perhaps, then, the Golem as well would not be able to express their experiences using human languages, even had it used them normatively.

This is of course also an issue of being neurogender. Maybe human language has no words for the Golem because the Golem's languages are different. Perhaps saying "human language" is vastly incorrect in this context and should be phrased as "cisgender nonautistic language." The Golem does not speak that language, much like many of us. To make a marginal example, the process of writing this paper is an act of translation. Academic English is several times removed from my languages as an autistic person. For you to read this paper, it has been proofread and edited many times over by reviewers, by professional proofreaders and by the lovely editors of this issue.

For the Golem, the words that the Rabbi puts on their body decides their fate. For trans people, what word other people choose to describe them in front of a bigot may be a matter of life or death. This is true for the Golem as well in some iterations of the story. As Rosenberg describes, the Rabbi uses words to bring the Golem to

life, or into Golemhood.⁴⁸ It should be noted that in some iterations, such as the telling about Rabbi Elijah Bal-Shem of Khelm, when he creates the Golem's body he writes on the Golem's forehead the word *emet*, אמת, truth.⁴⁹ At some point in these stories the Golem becomes too powerful or too much of their own person, and the Rabbi decides that it is time for the Golem to die. He erases the first letter of the word *emet*, to make it *met*, מת. This word means "dead," and the Golem becomes dead.

For trans people, language sometimes is literally a matter of life or death, such as in the wording of laws that wish to take away our autonomy or deny us medical care. It may manifest as an issue of immediate survival or as a matter of mental health, physical health, or employment opportunities in our capitalist hellscape. This is even more severe for BIPOC, autistic, and otherwise further marginalized trans people.⁵⁰

Truth

The concept of "truth" is also used to validate or to harm trans people. Butler discusses the idea of "authentic" gender as gender so normative it can be imagined as being natural and essential.⁵¹ This is opposed to less normative genders, which are

⁴⁸ Yasif and Rosenberg, 75.

⁴⁹ Kieval, 3.

⁵⁰ Tosh Chabot, "Hypocrisy in Higher Education: Racism and Transphobia as Barriers and Harm in Mental Health," (Master's thesis, Lesley University, 2022); Alyosxa Tudor, "Terfism Is White Distraction: On BLM, Decolonising the Curriculum, Anti-Gender Attacks and Feminist Transphobia," *Engenderings* (blog), June 19, 2020; Uspenskiy.

⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 30.

often framed by bigots as contrived or fake. Butler explains, however, that no gender is essential; rather, gender has always been shifting, developing and changing. No gender presentation is 'natural,' in the sense that it is not linked with society. While the Golem may seem linked with nature through their animality, its gender is contrived, since as a river it was not gendered.

Moreover, some transphobic people use the rhetoric of "truth" to tell trans people that they are not "real."⁵² Bigots like to ask us, "But what are you *really*?" in an attempt to impose their false notions of truth on our bodies. Many trans people also find ourselves asking, "What am I *really*, underneath all the pressures and threats from society?" or for some, "What do I know myself to *really* be?"

For the Golem to be branded as either truth or dead is horrifying. The Rabbi takes the right of branding the Golem through a notion of truth, based on his own agenda. In other words, the Golem does not even have to be untruthful to be put to death; he simply becomes too powerful. This is unfortunately similar to the way transphobic people in power brand transgender people, as fits their agendas.⁵³

Conclusion

⁵² Uspenskiy, 26.

⁵³ Another noteworthy aspect of the Golem's story is the word "Golem." Eli Eshed tells us that the word 'Golem' is linked with the Hebrew word "*golmi*," גולמי, which means "formless" or "unfinished." I would suggest considering another close Hebrew word, "*gilum*," גילום, which means in Hebrew, "portrayal," or "performance." As Butler tells us, performance of gender is at the base of all genders and is in no way specific to those whose performance is called into attention. I think it is really interesting that a story that is so trans in vibe and subtext centers a word so synonymous with queer studies and with Butler.

When I first told someone that I was genderqueer, I didn't have a word for it. At the time, there were no people outside the gender binary in popular media, and I had no way of knowing whether there was anybody other than me who was the same. I held onto stories about cis gay men who used to have similar concerns and told myself it had to be that way. I made up a word for it. I searched and searched the internet, looking for it in books, in music, and in fashion. The first person I told was my best friend at the time. I really trusted him. But he told me to never tell anyone, and that no one was ever going to accept me—that being attracted to more than one gender was cute, but this was beyond anything I could do. For a day or two, I hid in bed. I happened to be reading *Frankenstein*, which was not the best choice for my mental health at the time. I identified with the Monster, and the accounts of his being rejected by society and hated by everyone were troubling. But my story ends well: I did talk about my gender identity, a lot. I got kicked out of very many places, but I built a genderqueer community and found my people. Years later, I came across one of the establishing papers in Transgender Studies by Stryker and found that I was not alone in identifying with Frankenstein's Monster.

The Golem's story and lived experiences strongly resemble the experiences of trans people and autistic people. Like many trans people, the Golem is brought into a specific embodiment by a powerful man who does not share her experiences or identities. As Stryker stresses, this is sometimes done without consideration of the trans person's needs and wants, prioritizing the powerful man's agenda. Such attitudes are clearly true of the Golem, who is regularly used as somewhat of an object. Her opinions are rarely addressed, and when they are, it is mostly to show her presumed

consent. As is the case for many trans people, language is used to control the Golem, both conceptually and directly. So is the notion of “truth,” as truth is framed by those in power. Perhaps this reading may provide a small way for transgender and autistic Jewish people to reclaim a bit of their heritage.

The weekend I spent hiding from my best friend’s transphobia could have gone differently. Perhaps, had I been reading about a Jewish neurogender Golem, I would have felt less horrified and alone. A character to identify with and to celebrate, who was not persecuted and isolated, would have been better reading material. Even as I write, transphobic people are trying to frame trans people as a trend, and autistic people as unfit for agency or knowledge. Claiming the Golem can help disprove these notions and offer a better representation, for trans people as well as for cis.

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