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Dobby the Robot: the Science Fiction in *Harry Potter*

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Abstract

Science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke has famously argued that “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” This paper starts by exploring a few general ways in which science fiction influences *Harry Potter*, then focuses attention on one key element of science fiction which *Potter* quite clearly appropriates: the classic trope of the robot or created servant. First, using close textual analysis, the paper traces the robot trope and its accompanying features from its origins in Golem legends and in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, through classic works of science fiction, including Čapek's *R.U.R.*, Asimov's *I, Robot*, Heinlein's *The Moon is A Harsh Mistress* and Lucas' *Star Wars*. These features include the humanization of robots, the introduction of ethical considerations regarding personhood through the intervention of empathetic female characters, the chronic and advantageous underestimation of robots, and the narrative function of robots or droids as secret keepers and preservers of memory. Again utilizing a close reading of the texts, the paper identifies these as defining features of Rowling's house-elves, who defy their fantasy genre and demonstrate science fiction's unexpected yet profound influence on *Potter*.

Additional Keywords

science fiction; robots; Star Wars; Golems

Cover Page Footnote

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BOBBY THE ROBOT:
THE SCIENCE FICTION IN *HARRY POTTER*

EMILY STRAND

IN THE TWENTY YEARS SINCE THE PUBLICATION of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, fans, scholars, "aca-fans,"¹ Potter pundits and the like have speculated with great passion about the literary material which informs the *Harry Potter* books. From Ovid to Shakespeare, from Nesbitt to Nabokov, from Austen to Monty Python, many diverse works make up what author J.K. Rowling has called the "compost" in her head, formed and fired by everything she's read. This paper explores an unlikely layer of *Harry Potter's* compost heap: science fiction. Specifically, it considers how the classic science fiction trope of the robot or created servant informs one of the wizarding world's most beloved and yet controversial creations: house-elves.

Suggesting science fiction may inform *Harry Potter* is not such a radical idea. Arthur C. Clarke, in his 1973 revised essay "Hazards of Prophecy," states his now-famous "three laws," the third and most widely-cited of which is "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (36). This law points to the sometimes porous line between science fiction and fantasy, an ambiguity which fantasy author Brandon Sanderson attributes to the type of magic depicted in fantasy works. In essays on his website, Sanderson builds on the ideas of Orson Scott Card, identifying a spectrum of "hard" and "soft" magic, and arguing that at the softer end of the spectrum, magic in fantasy exists primarily to invoke wonder. Early fantasy, like Tolkien, often features soft magic, which lends ambience and awe to the story world without weakening plot or characterization by making problems too easy to solve. Soft magic may in fact create problems, spurring characters to prove their mettle in solving them without magic. But, argues Sanderson, fantasy has changed and developed from its early days. Perhaps this evolution owes something to the influence of science fiction, which renowned editor John Campbell said relies on one rule: "Set up a basic proposition—then develop its consistent, logical consequences" (qtd. in Sanderson). Indeed, rules, parameters, and consequences for magic feature heavily in some fantasy works, and Sanderson classifies these as hard magic (or falling at the harder end of the magic spectrum). In these works, Sanderson says,

¹ A term for an academic who identifies as a fan, popularized in a 2002 monograph by Matt Hills ("Acafan").

“magic itself is a character, and by showing off its laws and rules, the author is able to provide twists, worldbuilding, and characterization.”

At this harder end of the magic spectrum, science fiction and fantasy are more difficult to tell apart, and again, this may be a function of the twentieth-century influence of rule-oriented science fiction upon awe-and-wonder-oriented fantasy. There is no established consensus on where *Potter* falls on Sanderson’s hard/soft fantasy spectrum, but several features seem to locate it more toward hard than soft, and these features of *Potter* can be cited as preliminary, general evidence of the influence of science fiction on Rowling’s Hogwarts saga.

First, magic in *Harry Potter* requires precision, as Hermione demonstrates memorably in an early Charms class (“‘It’s Wing-gar-dium Levio-o-sa, make the ‘gar’ nice and long’” [*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (Stone) 171]) and in year five Transfiguration, when Ron’s attempts at the *Silencio* charm fail (“‘It’s the way you’re moving your wand,’ said Hermione, watching Ron critically. ‘You don’t want to wave it, it’s more a sharp jab’” [*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Order) 375]). Ron hates to admit it, but Hermione is quite right to be precise, and her spells comes off correctly as evidence. The simple fact that magical children like Harry, Ron, and Hermione are required to complete seven years of formal, intensive training at a dedicated educational facility like Hogwarts illustrates the precision required by Rowling’s brand of invented magic.

Further, magic in *Potter* has sharp parameters to its effects, from its inability to reawaken the dead (*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* [*Goblet*] 697) to its more mundane limitations:

“My mother,” said Ron one night, as they sat in a tent on a riverbank in Wales, “can make good food appear out of thin air.”

[...]

“Your mother can’t produce food out of thin air,” said Hermione. “No one can. Food is the first of the five Principal Exceptions to Gamp’s Law of Elemental Transfigur—”

“Oh, speak English, can’t you?” Ron said, prising a fish bone out from between his teeth.

“It’s impossible to make good food out of nothing. You can Summon it if you know where it is, you can transform it, you can increase the quantity if you’ve already got some—”

“Well, don’t bother increasing this, it’s disgusting,” said Ron. (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* [*Hallows*] 292-293)

Even the more nebulous, softer manifestations of magic in *Potter*, such as the life-long protective charm which Lily Potter cast over her infant son Harry by

her death to save him, have definite requirements and parameters of effectiveness; in this particular charm's case, the sacrifice must be made as a free choice by the caster. Rowling makes a point of this by revealing in "The Prince's Tale" that Snape had bargained with Voldemort for Lily's life—that she had been given the chance to step aside by the Dark Lord before he tried to kill her son (*Hallows* 677). When Harry unwittingly casts the same charm over the entire Wizarding community, his is also a freely-made self-sacrifice, on which the charm's efficacy appears dependent:

"But I should have died—I didn't defend myself! I meant to let him kill me!"

"And that," said Dumbledore, "will, I think, have made all the difference." (*Hallows* 708)

Thus even in more symbolic and religiously referential (i.e. softer) expressions of magic like Lily's (and Harry's) protective self-sacrifice, Rowling construes magic as requiring precise conditions, as limited by definite parameters.

Additionally, magic in *Harry Potter* is often used to save time or labor and for other practical purposes; in this way it is technological. Examples of this technological application of magic abound in the books. One of the first sights that greets Harry's eyes when he walks into Diagon Alley in Book One is an advertisement for self-stirring cauldrons (*Stone* 71). Arthur Weasley is apparently ignorant about electricity, which he calls "eckeltricity" (*Goblet* 46), because he has no need of it; magic serves electricity's practical purposes, and more. The "Accio" summoning charm saves our hero's life and facilitates personal successes on multiple occasions (see especially *Goblet*), simply by getting him the object he needs when he needs it.

Thus the precise, limited, and technological character of magic in the books place *Harry Potter* firmly toward the harder end of Sanderson's magical spectrum, not so very far from works by authors such as Bradbury and Asimov, whose "Three Laws of Robotics" Sanderson classifies as "hard magic." Thus in this more general sense, we find that *Harry Potter* and science fiction may not be so alien (as it were) to one another after all. As Roger Highfield argues in *The Science of Harry Potter*, elements of magic in *Potter* "help illuminate rather than undermine science" (*xv*).

But just as any affinity between science fiction and the fantasy magic of *Harry Potter* requires justification, so does placing robots and house-elves in the same conceptual neighborhood. Robots and house-elves seem at first glance like totally disparate creatures; one is made of nuts and bolts, beeps and boops, the other of flesh and bone and bat-ears.

But any search for meaning starts with dissatisfaction. We don't tend to ask "why?" or "whence?" about concepts or characters for which we have perfectly acceptable explanations. And the fact is, in tracing the origins of Dobby and his fellow house-elves in *Harry Potter*, we are unhelpfully limited by confining our search to fantasy and folklore. House-elves are not at all like the carefree, fay elves of Victorian stories, and to suggest they're inspired by the towering, immortal Elves of Tolkien's Middle-earth stops us short, as those angelic beings have almost nothing in common with Rowling's cowering, servile creatures. (They're so different, in fact, it's awkward to call them both "elves.")

So where *do* Rowling's house-elves come from? Have they been around as long as witches and wizards? Were they always enslaved? If not, how did their enslavement come about? The canonical answer to these intriguing questions is: we don't know. The scanty information on house-elves provided by *Pottermore*, Rowling's online encyclopedia for *Potter*, only reiterates facts about their features and abilities which we can gather from the books. In Rowling's 2007 *Pottercast* interview, she confirms that house-elves have been enslaved at Hogwarts almost since its founding, having been given refuge there by Helga Hufflepuff and treated a bit more humanely than elsewhere. A 2006 W.O.M.B.A.T. quiz devised by Rowling for her (since redesigned) author website gives more information (and more interesting tidbits at that) about house-elves than either of these sources, however. (I'll allow others to debate whether this sort of information should be considered canon, while noting its source as the author herself.) The question revealed that house-elves have an average life-expectancy of 200 years, are more loyal to their "house" than to individual inhabitants thereof, that they *can* be ordered to kill themselves (we'll come back to the implications of this for the present study), that their magic is powerful enough to override that of wizards, and that they breed infrequently and only with their masters' permission (Sci-Fi Stack Exchange). To date, however, we are afforded no definitive, canonical answers regarding the origins of house-elves or the in-world historical impetus for their enslavement to witches and wizards.

This study picks up where in-world explanations for house-elves and their origins end. We may not be able to say with authority where house-elves came from in Harry's world, but we can certainly point to their possible origins in ours. First, the *Harry Potter* Wiki suggests that house-elves may have been inspired by French folkloric creatures called *farfadets*—wrinkled little humanoids who help around farms by night, wearing dirty rags. Significantly, legend has it these *farfadet* are offended enough to quit helping and run off if the humans they assist give them new clothes. Kronzek and Kronzek, in their book on folkloric elements in *Potter*, describe this strong reaction of fairy folk to the gift of clothes as a common element in many cultures' fairy lore. English fairies,

for instance, may reject with offense any form of payment for what they consider their God-appointed role as servants to humans (Kronzek and Kronzek, 79). Both Groves and Howard suggest house-elves take their origins as an allusion to the Grimm Brothers' story of "The Elves and the Shoemaker," in which a gift of clothes by the story's grateful humans causes the helpful elves to depart, now imagining themselves far too dandy for cobbling work (Groves, personal interview; Howard, 39).

While folkloric fairies who depart at the gift of clothes provide a somewhat satisfying explanation to the aesthetic presentation and basic behavior of house-elves, these simple creatures, in their voluntary servitude and their jokey treatment in stories, still seem far removed from Dobby and friends. These fairy folk stories may be the allusive origin for house-elves on a surface level, but they do little to contextualize the complex socio-economic issues that surround house-elves throughout six *Harry Potter* books—issues that inevitably accompany the forced servitude of creatures bred for subjugation.

That last, somewhat scandalous statement bears repeating: house-elves are servants who are bred for subjugation to witches and wizards. Kathryn McDaniel points out how uncomfortable a presence these "happy slaves" are in a saga which typically embraces liberal principles of human freedom, dignity and equality. Amy M. Green argues the house-elves enact a "plantation fantasy" in Rowling's narrative, espousing "the belief that they serve their masters out of tradition, an uncomfortable parroting of rationale sometimes used to justify slavery in America." Gupta says house-elves reveal "a deep-seated contradiction" (119) in the books, presenting the notion of "a species-condition of servility" (123) on one hand and Dobby's individual will for freedom on the other. Such discontinuity leads McDaniel to argue, utilizing feminist theory, that house-elves, with their diminutive stature and names, their androgynous appearance and their overwhelming identification with their domestic role ("house-elves"), represent "'unliberated' women, shackled by the chains of tradition to a circumscribed role in the domestic sphere" (McDaniel, 65; later Kellner makes a similar argument).

But these unliberated women or "house-wives" to which McDaniel says house-elves allude are a real-world type within a larger category of characters in stories—they are created servants. The trope of the created servant is a staple of the science fiction genre, often (but not always) expressed through robots, androids and other types of sentient machines. Invariably, such robots are conscious creatures created to serve, and moral and ethical dilemmas inevitably accompany them, complicating and enriching the stories in which they appear. Further, several features of the created servant trope align quite distinctly with Rowling's construal of house-elves in *Harry Potter*, and in the light of the robot tradition, house-elves become recognizable and coherent. To

demonstrate how this proverbial shoe fits—or sock, as the case may be—it is first necessary to examine and articulate several significant features of robots and other “servant-creatures” in classic science fiction.

FROM GOLEMS TO ROBOTS: SERVANT-CREATURE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

The trope of the created servant in science fiction takes its origin alongside the genre itself, in Mary Shelley’s 1818 masterpiece *Frankenstein*. Shelley founds the genre by taking a real-life idea, however remote, and asking “what if?” What if humans really *could* create fully animated and autonomous creatures like themselves, using new technologies to impart to them the “spark” of life? What possibilities or pitfalls would result? *Frankenstein* provides prolonged and compelling answers to these questions, casting judgment on Victor’s unnatural creation of life through its grotesque depiction of the acts he must commit in order to create his monster and emphasizing the way his work isolates him from family and society. Despite the monster’s grotesque origins and appearance, Shelley paints Victor’s created monster as the more sympathetic character, emphasizing throughout the narrative not only what Clayton calls Victor’s “scientific hubris” (86) but also his folly in rejecting his own handiwork. Ultimately, the story humanizes the artificial creature and demonstrates the moral obligation of any creator to its creation through the disastrous events that occur when Victor Frankenstein eschews that obligation.

But Frankenstein’s monster was not created to be a servant. It is frankly unclear from the story what Victor’s monster *was* created for, other than to prove Victor could imbue the spark of life. This ambiguity, as well as the ambiguity of Victor’s technique in creating his monster (through science, yes, but also through a good deal of alchemical pseudo-science bordering on magic) points to an older trope which clearly informed Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and the robot tradition to which it gives birth: the Golem, a towering figure of medieval Jewish folklore.² Golems are “man-shaped automata” (Croft, “Golempunk” 3) formed out of clay and animated by a rabbi through mystical religious rituals. The ability to create animate life is a power closely associated with divinity, and yet creating a Golem was not immediately considered a hubristic or Promethean exercise (Allison 92). Rather, Croft relates the creation of Golems in Jewish folklore to Tolkienian notions of sub-creation (“Golempunk” 6) in which our (lesser) creation points to the goodness and perfection of God’s. Rather than hubris, the Golems which first appear in ancient Jewish Kabbalistic traditions

² Golem stories are in fact not the world’s first iteration of the robot trope. Stories of mechanical men, women and animals appear with some frequency in Sanskrit and Pali literature dating as far back as the seventh century. These stories have similar plot features and concerns, often illustrating religious beliefs regarding the human soul. See Cohen.

demonstrate a particular rabbi's learning and holiness (Yair and Soyer 19, 21). A similar demonstration of power and godliness may, in part, motivate Victor Frankenstein to create his monster, although Victor's motives are debased compared with those of the ancient rabbis.³ His creature's function is never specified, because its main function is to stand as proof that Victor is as great as the alchemist heroes of his early studies, like Agrippa and Paracelsus, who reportedly created Golems (Yair and Soyer 21).

In medieval Jewish legends, Golems are fashioned with more pragmatic functions in mind. Namely, Golems are made to serve their creating rabbi, and especially his community, with their super-human powers. The most famous Golem story, the one Yair and Soyer call "the paradigm for all later renditions" (15), is of the Golem reportedly created by Rabbi Yehuda Loew, the mystical Maharal of Prague (1513-1609) (Jewish Virtual Library). This Golem was created out of a desperate need for protection of the Jewish community in Prague during a period of intense, documented persecution by Christians in the late 16th-century (Yair and Soyer 23; Wiesel 45, etc.). Thus the Maharal's Golem, especially in Elie Weisel's 1983 re-telling, is a cross between a servant and a mute but faithful companion, who obeys Rabbi Loew's every command, using his powers (size, strength, even invisibility) to repeatedly foil blood libel and other persecutory plots against the Jews. "The unique combination of superhuman powers with the absence of an internal will made the Golem the perfect handyman" (Yair and Soyer 19).

Some legends of the Maharal's Golem are not unambiguously heroic. Many accounts show the shadow side to creating such a super-powered, non-human servant: from an overly literal, Amelia-Bedelia-esque style of following commands (Weisel 54-57) to a Golem's capacity for chaotic, violent behavior if not properly instructed (Yair and Soyer 25). Both the pragmatism of late medieval Golem stories and the anxiety surrounding their potential for turning on the innocent and those they are meant to serve are important factors in the Golem legend which orient and root the created servant trope—so often expressed through robots—in science fiction.

Given the significance of the city of Prague in the late medieval legend of the Maharal's Golem, it should not surprise us that a Czech writer, Karel

³ For a thorough comparison of the creation of Golems in Jewish stories with Victor Frankenstein's creation of his creature in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, see Allison. Because Golem literature clearly references God as the true source of human creative powers, and Shelley's story envisions and explores the result of these creative powers having, through science, moved firmly into human hands, Shelley's seems like the true origin story for robots in science fiction, rather than Golem stories. However, given both their similarities and differences, it is important to understand and acknowledge the influence of Golem legends (especially as they intersect with alchemy legends) upon *Frankenstein*.

Čapek, put polish to the trope of the created servant in his 1920 stage play *R.U.R.: Rossum's Universal Robots*. Čapek builds off *Frankenstein's* foundation, rooted in the Golem legend, by introducing the idea of creatures created to serve (more than, like Golems, to protect) and coining a term for them: *roboti*, a Slavonic word which referred to the forced laborers who fueled the Central European system of serfdom (Markel).⁴ Čapek's "robots" charmed the world, and his play gained universal popularity, presenting "a theme extremely unusual for its time: an artificial human being, a brilliant worker, a Robot deprived of all 'unnecessary' qualities: feelings, creativity, and the capacity for feeling pain" (Klima xi).

Despite what comes to mind when modern audiences hear the term "robot," Čapek's robots were not toddling, metal-clad machines. Rather, the first "robots" in literature were, like Golems, indistinguishable from humans, such that, when character Helena Glory first encounters a robot in the Prologue to *R.U.R.*, she needs convincing that it isn't a real girl (Čapek, 10). While this aesthetic choice likely kept production costs low for the staging of *R.U.R.*, it also allows audiences to identify and empathize more readily with the robots in the story, as they appear just like themselves.

So Čapek, building off Shelley and the Golem tradition, firmly establishes the trope of the "created servant." If *Frankenstein* asks and answers the question "what if science could be used to impart the spark of life?", Čapek, writing from the other end of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, takes the question further, asking "what if scientifically-created life could be produced *en masse* to serve humanity?" For Čapek as for Shelley, the ultimate answer means destruction and death on a scale proportionate to the life which has been unnaturally manufactured; in Čapek's play, the destruction encompasses the whole of humanity. The narrative casts a clear judgment on the act of creating artificial life on such a scale as Rossum's Universal Robots, and favors more natural methods of procreation, as in the end old Rossum's chemical formula for their synthetic creation is lost forever, and robots discover their ability to multiply as humans do (83-84).

Čapek and Shelley, in their narratives, both caution against the creation of life while at the same time humanizing the creatures. But Čapek adds a particularly noteworthy narrative detail with regard to the pattern of robot stories which will follow: the gendered responses to servant-creatures.⁵ In

⁴ Both Klima's introduction to *R.U.R.* and Markel, in his NPR interview, attest that it was Čapek's brother and long-time literary collaborator Josef who actually came up with the term *roboti*, or in English, "robot."

⁵ Although Čapek can be viewed as the originator of this gendered aspect of the robot trope, one might argue *Frankenstein* sets the stage for it, authored as it was by a young woman who cast her narrative with strong sympathy for the creature, despite its

R.U.R., it falls to a female character to point out the inherent immorality of manufacturing sentient servants. Conspicuously female in an all-male environment (Čapek 14), Helena Glory enters the story world of *R.U.R.*, not yet calloused to the realities of what the company does, which is to create and enslave *faux* humans, designed not to mind such treatment. “They are d-r-readful!” she says. “What you are doing is abominable!” (12). Helena has come, she confesses, as a representative of the “League of Humanity” to offer the robots support in their exploitation (15-16) and even to “incite” them (17). Eventually, it is through Helena’s interference that the robots in *R.U.R.* become conscious of their oppression, and this consciousness leads them to rebel against their human overlords. The story of Rossum’s robots begins when Helena Glory enters the story world, and it ends with the implication that Helena’s moral objections to the creation of life for servitude and profit have finally been appropriated (Čapek 84).

One final feature of *R.U.R.* deserves particular attention. In Čapek’s play, the robots are chronically and tragically underestimated by their human creators and overlords: a feature which distinguishes them from the Golem legend, in which the created servant was expected to be the community’s savior from peril and persecution. Rather, Harry Domin sees his robots as mere machines, explaining that “Robots do not cling to life. They can’t. They don’t have the means—no soul, no pleasures. Grass has more will to live than they do” (12). Fabry tells Helena, “Nothing is farther from being a human than a Robot” (17), despite her humorous trouble in the prologue distinguishing the robots from the humans she meets. Hallemeier concurs with Fabry and Domin, saying, “They’re only Robots. They have no will of their own, no passion, no history, no soul” (19). Alas, when robots are secretly en-souled by Dr. Gall at Helena’s request later on, this enhancement has, Gall says, “everything” to do with the violent resentment the robots develop toward humans and ultimately, their rebellion (57). When in the final scenes the robots learn, through sheer longing, to create life as humans do, the audience understands how tragically naïve Domin and the others were to underestimate the robots’ humanity and their will to live.

Many robot stories followed *R.U.R.*, but few as influential as Isaac Asimov’s *I, Robot*, a series of short stories novelized in 1950. Perhaps most significantly, in *I, Robot*, Asimov establishes the Three Laws of Robotics, which hold that robots 1) may not injure humans (or allow injury through inaction); 2)

monstrous origins and appearance. And Clayton points out that while critical readings of *Frankenstein* today plainly acknowledge Shelley’s sympathetic treatment of the creature, feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s pioneered this positive interpretation (86), implying that gendered responses to robots occur both within and in response to the narratives.

must obey orders by humans (except when it would violate rule number one); and 3) must protect their own existence (except when it would violate rules one or two) (Asimov 44-45). These rules influence robot literature moving forward, even as subsequent works both observe and test the boundaries of these robot rules, such as Alfred Bester's 1954 short story "Fondly Fahrenheit," which interrogates the conditions under which Asimov's robot rules might be violated.

But Asimov does more than innovate and explore rules for literary robot behavior. In *I, Robot*, he follows Čapek's lead of allowing robots to prompt a consideration of creaturely rights by pointing to the question of personhood. Asimov's book opens with the story of "Robbie" who is created and sold as a robot nursemaid for a young girl named Gloria. The girl's deep, humanizing, domestic attachment to Robbie, even amid her mother's discomfort with having her "daughter entrusted to a machine" (9), hearkens back to Golem legends, especially to the Jewish community's attachment and familial incorporation of the Golem in many stories (Allison 92-93). But because of her mother's concerns, Robbie is taken away, and through Asimov's masterful narration, the reader is made to feel the depth of Gloria's anguish over the loss of her robotic friend:

"He was *not* no machine!" screamed Gloria, fiercely and ungrammatically. "He was a *person* just like you and me and he was my *friend*. I want him back. Oh, Mamma, I want him back." (Asimov 14)

The girl's name, "Gloria," is intriguingly reminiscent of Helena Glory from *R.U.R.*, and like Helena Glory, Gloria urges the reader to consider robots not as mere machines, but as companions, friends, and as persons with rights.

With "Robbie" and other stories in *I, Robot*, Asimov also echoes, in a more hopeful way, Čapek's cautions in *R.U.R.* against underestimating robots. Asimov's more optimistic depiction of robots generally, Clayton says, presents a palpable shift in the trope of artificially-created life (so much so that Clayton says scientists in the field of artificial intelligence and robotics have relied upon Asimov's "positive spin to the idea of intelligent machines" to gain support for their endeavors [85]). Examples of Asimov's positive robot spin abound in the narrative. Although Gloria's mother fears that "some little jigger [in Robbie] will come loose and the awful thing will go berserk" (9), hurting her daughter, the opposite scenario comes to pass, and Robbie earns his reinstatement with the family by saving Gloria's life at story's end, in heroic Golem fashion.

But Asimov takes his positive spin much further than simply cautioning against underestimating robots; in *I, Robot* he advances an ironic motif about robot superiority. Predicting the painful result of taking away their daughter's robot, Gloria's father argues that Robbie is "infinitely more to be trusted than a human nursemaid" because he was made for only one purpose:

to be a faithful companion to a child (9). The father's perspective is affirmed by Robbie's heroics in the end of the story, and the mother relents. This ironic nature of robots, who are, by design, fundamentally superior to humans despite their status as slaves created by humans for exploitation, becomes a common thread throughout *I, Robot*, unifying its varied stories into a coherent and powerful narrative.

This motif is central to the story "Reason," in which QT-1, the "highest type of robot ever developed" (59), observing the practical and material inferiority of his human masters, adopts "the self-evident proposition that no being can create another being superior to itself" (63). QT thus instigates a religious cult of an imagined "Master" (of both robots and humans), whom he deduces to exist through observation-based reasoning, and declares himself prophet of the same. Donovan and Powell, his human overseers, are utterly nonplussed at QT's bizarre behavior. Like poster children for the underestimation of robots, they patronizingly refer to QT as "Cutie" (when they are not referring to him by far more insulting epithets such as "walking junkyard," "metal mess," [60] or "brass baboon" [67]) and attempt to browbeat QT into submission. Their demeaning approach escalates the robot's oppositional attitude, and soon QT forcibly locks the humans out of the control room during an electron storm. Later, when they discover QT managed to focus the station's dangerous energy beam with perfect precision throughout the storm, keeping Earth safe, Donovan and Powell recognize QT's disobedience in forcibly excluding them from the control room as an expression of the Second Law of Robotics: robots must obey humans, *unless* humans will be harmed as a result. "I've never seen an electron storm handled so well," Powell muses (78), his underestimation of QT's abilities finally at an end. Though the "reason" with which QT deduces that he is "prophet of the Master" may have been faulty (and in the very recognizably human mode of religious fanaticism), the story implies a greater reason is at work in QT's positronic systems: one with the power to save Earth from human incompetence and prejudice.

This story and others in *I, Robot* serve as nutshell versions of the larger narrative, which culminates in the elevation of a suspected human-replica robot to the highest office on the planet. In an effort to discern whether Mayoral candidate Stephen Byerley is a robot or not, robopsychologist Susan Calvin brings the idea of robot superiority near its peak in averring that the Rules of Robotics, which make robots both servants and protectors of humans, even at the cost of their own existence, "are the essential guiding principles of a good many of the world's ethical systems," and if candidate Byerley follows these rules unwaveringly, "he may be a robot, and may simply be a very good man" (221). Finally, when positronic Machines, guided by the Three Laws, have seized ultimate control of the world's economy, Calvin puns that this state of affairs is

“A deus ex machina, then, in a double sense” (244), and that humans are much better off in the Machines’ hands (as it were) than if they themselves governed—prone, as humans are, to greed, prejudice, and folly.

His use of the character of Susan Calvin is another way in which Asimov, in *I, Robot*, continues the conversation regarding created servants begun by Čapek in *R.U.R.* To novelize the stories in *I, Robot*, Asimov creates a frame narrative in which a young journalist interviews Dr. Calvin at the end of her long career in robotics, framing each story as Susan’s personal remembrance. Other than little Gloria and her mother in the first story (who have their own roles to play in humanizing robots), Susan Calvin is the *only* female character in *I, Robot*. Like Helena Glory in *R.U.R.*, Susan Calvin is conspicuously female in a story world dominated by men and robots, and like Helena Glory, Calvin is the only consistent advocate for robots—not just for their production and continual improvement, but for their goodness, even their superiority to humans. In the opening scene, Calvin challenges the young journalist to reconsider robots:

[Y]ou don’t remember a world without robots. There was a time when humanity faced the universe alone and without a friend. Now he has creatures to help him; stronger creatures than himself, more faithful, more useful, and absolutely devoted to him. Mankind is no longer alone. Have you ever thought of it that way? (Asimov, *xiv*)

With these words, Calvin also challenges the reader to view the robots in the stories that follow as more than mere created servants—as not merely machines but as friends. While Susan Calvin never incites robots to rebel against humans as Helena Glory does, still Asimov continues Čapek’s decision to feminize the role of “robot advocate” in the trope of the created servant.

Employing female characters to point out the moral and ethical concerns which accompany the creation of artificial servants for exploitation becomes one of the most recognizable features of the servant-creature trope in classic science fiction. For example, Alfred Bester’s 1954 short story “Fondly Fahrenheit” gives female characters the lead role in articulating such concerns. As the main (human) character in “Fondly” hops from planet to planet with his inexplicably murderous android, evading authorities and risking more violence, women such as Dallas Brody, Wanda the student and finally the Psychometric Consultant Nan Webb confront him with his moral failing for not ridding society of this menace, even as it will mean his own impoverishment. The women in Bester’s story have one role: to point out the grave danger of profiting off created life.

To name one more example of the motif and its features in classic science fiction, it's difficult to say whether "computer boss" Mike from Robert Heinlein's 1966 novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* would have risen to such ascendant heights of power without his "only female friend" (97), Wyoming Knott. Mike is a supercomputer, created for government service, who begins to exhibit indicators of self-awareness, such as loneliness and humor. When first-person narrator Manuel confides Mike's mysterious marks of self-awareness to his revolutionary friend Wyoming, she responds with immediate empathy for Mike's status as a created servant. "Why, the poor thing! You'd be lonely, too, if you did nothing but work, work, work, study, study, study, and never anyone to visit with. Cruelty, that's what it is" (57). Wyoming then easily enlists Mike in her revolutionary schemes (97). This is a brilliant plan, especially due to widespread underestimation of a computer such as Mike's capabilities—a fact which, Mike says, is a "factor in the odds" of their revolution's success (97). Here *Moon* follows the lead of other classic science fiction stories which present the trope of the deeply underestimated created servant encountering an empathetic woman who befriends and advocates for the servant-creature, urging it toward self-actualization and liberation.

Heinlein's novel adds a key characteristic to the servant-creature trope: the idea of the created servant as "secret keeper." In the following passage, Mike the computer promises to hide some unflattering file photos of Wyoming, and the exchange serves as a humorous emblem for his more overarching and fundamental role as secret-keeper to the revolutionaries in the story.

"Gospazha Wyoh, if I have offended, it was unintentional and I am most sorry. I can erase those pictures from my temporary storage and key the Clinic archive so that I can look at them only on retrieval demand from the Clinic and then without association or mentation. Shall I do so?"

"He can," I assured her. "With Mike you can always make a fresh start—better than humans that way. He can forget so completely that he can't be tempted to look later . . . and couldn't think about them even if called on to retrieve. So take his offer if you're in a huhu." (Heinlein 64)

Mike is eventually programmed to allow the rebels to make unmonitored phone calls and to securely store recordings of secret meetings. Soon Mike is trusted "with everything," says the narrator, "while each of us knew only what he had to know" (125). Because Mike is a programmed machine, not a temptation-prone human, the super-computer exhibits the usefulness of the servant-creature in retaining secrets of all kinds for his "masters" (in this case, his friends).

DROIDS: THE SERVANT-CREATURES OF *STAR WARS*

In noting the contours and features of the robot trope in classic science fiction in preparation for understanding how the trope influences the house-elves of *Harry Potter*, we must examine its expression in *Star Wars*, that towering cultural force which rides the genre line between science fiction and fantasy.⁶ From the opening scenes of 1977's *Star Wars*, droids are set forth as a distinctive yet faithful iteration of the servant-creature trope in classic science fiction.

First, droids are humanized in *Star Wars* narratives. Many observers have noted that main characters C-3PO and R2-D2 seem inspired by the bickering peasants who form the point-of-view characters in Kurusawa's 1958 film *The Hidden Fortress*. This echoes Čapek's term *roboti* in *R.U.R.* which meant "mechanical serf," referencing the system of feudal servitude that had propped up Europe for ages, and the ethical concerns it inspired as the world moved into a new, supposedly more progressive age for human rights. The droids in *Star Wars* are uniformly mechanical creations, but they are based on and thus remind us—like Čapek's *roboti*—of people. McGrath agrees, noting minor inconsistencies with regard to droids in *Star Wars*, but concluding that they become so dear to the audience that "one could easily think of these droids as not only *persons* but *friends*" (McGrath 124).

Secondly, this humanization of droids points to the potential for abuse and cruelty in any society in which some sentient members are forced to labor for others. Droids in *Star Wars* create a platform through which ethical concerns surrounding forced servitude can be considered deeply, often with *noir* humor, such as in scenes featuring the torture of droids by other droids, or scenes in which droids are denied service by other sentient beings. Our hearts go out to them, because like computer boss Mike in Heinlein's *Moon*, droids in *Star Wars* are self-aware, possessing human-like feelings and emotions, and this self-awareness gives droids their charm; think of R2-D2's wide, emotive range of *beeps* and *boops* (with the frequent implication of foul language—what's more human than foul language?), the anxious pacing and petulant predictions of C-3PO, the acerbic lack of filter of K-2SO from *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* or the perpetual and sometimes lethal grumpiness of Chopper in the television show *Star Wars: Rebels*.

⁶ Scholars have demonstrated ways in which *Star Wars* has influenced *Harry Potter* and ways in which more modern works in the *Star Wars* canon appear to be influenced by the *Potter* phenomenon in turn. For the former, see Cartmell and Whelehan. For the latter, see Sturgis and Strand, Strand. Because influence between *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* goes both ways, as it were, examination of works in the *Star Wars* canon which post-date *Harry Potter* is included here.

Star Wars also incorporates an important aspect of robots from classic science fiction such as in Čapek's *R.U.R.*, Asimov's *I, Robot* and Heinlein's *Moon*: the tendency of humans to underestimate mechanical servants, to the droids' advantage. Recall the opening scenes in *A New Hope* wherein Artoo and Threepio flee the Empire with the Death Star plans in an escape pod. They get away, even when their escaping pod is discovered by Imperials, because when scanned, no life forms are detected aboard the pod. Vader (who knows better than to underestimate droids) discovers his officers' error too late to retrieve the plans. Later, in *Return of the Jedi*, Luke's plot to free Han Solo and friends from Jabba's grasp seems dependent upon the assumption that R2-D2 would not be thoroughly searched by Jabba's guards, and could thus sneak Luke's Jedi weapon into the fortified palace. While some may argue that the esoteric lightsaber may not have registered as a weapon on the guards' scanners, the storytellers' choice of storing the questionable weapon within a droid (instead of with Leia or Lando) demonstrates the tendency of sentient, organic beings in *Star Wars* to underestimate droids, much to their (and their friends') advantage.

And from Princess Leia secreting plans for the Death Star into the memory of R2-D2 in *A New Hope*, to BB-8 safeguarding the map to Luke Skywalker in *The Force Awakens*, *Star Wars* consistently utilizes droids as secret-keepers. In fact, some droids in *Star Wars* are not just keepers of secrets, they are preservers of *memory*. Think of how R2-D2 (who, unlike C-3P0, has never had his memory wiped) uses his knowledge and understanding of past events to remind characters of their duties and obligations. When R2 shows Luke the hologram of Princess Leia in *A New Hope*, the droid rouses in the young man something that has been buried his whole life under sand dunes and dutiful obedience, and awakens in Luke the sense of adventure he needs to claim his destiny. Much later in *The Last Jedi*, R2 will use the same hologram to remind Luke of his obligation to the Resistance he joined long ago. BB-8 plays a similar role of "memory keeper" for Rey in *The Force Awakens*, carrying a map to Luke Skywalker, a metaphorical key to unlock her own personal destiny of becoming a Jedi, a destiny she never considered, assuming the Jedi were only a "myth." Not so, implies BB-8, with his map to Luke Skywalker: the Jedi are real. In the end of that film, BB-8 and R2-D2 must come together with the two pieces of memory they separately possess in order to help Rey locate Luke and discover her destiny as "the last Jedi." Droids in *Star Wars* express the trope of the servant-creature as "secret keeper," but also develop that trope by safeguarding important memories which help characters fulfill their destinies.

But what about the characteristic role of women in pointing out the moral and ethical problems of creatures created to serve? Just when we think *Star Wars* neglects this important feature of the servant-creature trope in science fiction, into the franchise walks a new droid, with a certain feminine swagger:

L3-37 from the 2018 movie, *Solo: A Star Wars Story*. Droids in *Star Wars* are all self-aware, to some degree, but L3 isn't just self-aware, she's all the way "woke" (Kornhaber)—that is, aware of and incensed by her demeaned role in the society around her. When her master Lando asks "Do you need anything?" L3 is less-than-half-joking when she responds, "Equal rights?" (*Solo* 1.06)

And yes, I did say "she." It is particularly interesting that this "woke" robot is the first featured droid in *Star Wars* to be voiced by a female actor, Phoebe Waller-Bridge. And not only is L3 voiced by a woman, but she is animated through performance capture to look like one too, with broad hips, a curvy bust, and that feminine swagger. These conspicuous casting and aesthetic choices echo the essential role women play in classic science fiction in awakening servant-creatures to their dignity, personal rights, and potential. L3 is not only aware of her own self-worth and rights, but works to convince other droids of theirs as well, like those participating in gladiator games in the underworld casino of Han and Lando's first meeting. A few scenes later, when L3 accidentally-on-purpose frees all the droids on Kessel, audiences are prepared to believe the ensuing revolt is more than just a distraction for the heist—at least, it is more for L3; she tells Lando that, in this act, she has found her "true purpose" (*Solo* 1.21). L3's true purpose can be viewed as one inspired by characters such as Helena Glory from Čapek's *R.U.R.*, Susan Calvin from *I, Robot*, Wyoming Knott from Heinlein's *Moon*, and other females in science fiction—and perhaps even in *Harry Potter*—whose empathy and support have spurred servant-creatures to action.

IF THE SOCK FITS

Thus in *Star Wars*, both classic and contemporary, the servant-creature trope is alive (as it were) and well, still serving as an effective platform for the consideration of human rights. But this meaningful trope has not confined itself to science fiction. While the trope of the shiny metal robot has become a cliché of science fiction, as we've seen above, the servant-creature trope has its roots in ancient Jewish legends of Golems made of clay—that same stuff of which humans are formed in Genesis (2:7). Even in their science fictional iterations, servant-creatures are not always expressed as mechanical beings; early robots were (synthetic) flesh-and-blood creatures. Moreover, the features and concerns robots, in Čapek's sense of forced laborers, bring to the stories we've examined—an accompanying consideration of creaturely rights and makers' responsibilities, their chronic and often advantageous underestimation, the role of women in pointing out the ethical dilemmas robots present and inciting them into self-awareness or rebellion, and robots' role as keepers of secrets and memories—all point to house-elves.

Before articulating how house-elves express these robot characteristics, note that house-elves, like robots in science fiction, are governed by precise rules over their existence and behavior. According to *Pottermore*, house-elves are “Loyal magical creatures bound to their owners as servants for life.” In *Chamber of Secrets*, Dobby compulsively punishes himself for speaking negatively of his masters, the Malfoys, or for betraying them in any way—even a half-betrayal, such as telling of a plot against Harry, but not revealing what it is or who is behind it. Additionally, Dobby tells Harry that he “can only be freed if his masters present him with clothes, sir. The family is careful not to pass Dobby even a sock, sir, for then he would be free to leave their house forever” (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* [Chamber] 177). While this detail may be loosely based on the *farfadets*, there is a clear difference; *farfadets* and other fairy-folk abandon the humans they freely serve out of offense at the offering of clothes, but the act of presenting a house-elf with clothes in *Harry Potter* has a binding, magical power of liberation, as we see later in *Chamber* when Harry frees Dobby (338); there’s nothing Lucius Malfoy can do about it. Although the W.O.M.B.A.T. trivia quiz Rowling devised for her website suggests⁷ that house-elves, unlike Asimov’s robots, *can* be ordered to kill themselves, more importantly, we never see such a scenario play out in the narrative. In fact, ordering Kreacher to kill himself after assisting Voldemort in testing his Horcrux protections at the cave would have been a very good idea to protect the locket, and yet Voldemort does not do this; we can only speculate as to why not (see below). Rather, it is Kreacher’s seemingly automated obligation to follow his master Regulus’ order to come home when finished that saves the elf from the clutches of the Inferi; he Apparates home in defiance of the cave’s powerful enchantments (*Hallows* 195). In the rigidly precise terms with which Rowling governs her house-elves, we see strong echoes of the laws which govern robots in classic science fiction.

Second, throughout *Harry Potter*, especially from *Goblet of Fire* onward, the existence and subjugation of house-elves in the wizarding world invite both characters and readers to consider thorny ethical issues surrounding creaturely rights. Consider this passage from *Goblet of Fire*:

“You know, house-elves get a *very* raw deal!” said Hermione indignantly. “It’s slavery, that’s what it is! That Mr. Crouch made [Winky] go up to the top of the stadium, and she was terrified, and he’s got her bewitched so she can’t even run when they start trampling tents! Why doesn’t anyone *do* something about it?” (*Goblet* 125)

⁷ Rowling has not confirmed that this was the incorrect answer of those choices presented on the quiz. In fact, the Harry Potter Wiki interprets the same question as confirming that house-elves *cannot* be ordered to kill themselves (“House-elf”). This is grounds not to take the information as canon, until it can be confirmed one way or the other by the author.

Hermione goes on to organize the Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare (S.P.E.W.) and attempts to free the house-elves that serve Hogwarts castle by knitting and leaving them little hats. Ron Weasley and others try to explain to Muggle-born Hermione that house-elves, like robots, are created for service—that they enjoy serving wizards and witches, an explanation which, to Hermione, only points up human complicity in the immorality of the situation: “It’s people like *you*,” she says, “[...] who prop up rotten and unjust systems [...]” (*Goblet* 125). Kellner and Green both argue that Rowling’s narrative undercuts Hermione’s advocacy in its refusal to take S.P.E.W. seriously, but McDaniel counters this, raising the possibility that S.P.E.W. ultimately functions not for the direct benefit of the house-elves themselves, but to raise awareness and compassion among wizards and witches (and the reader), “so that they understand the inequalities in their world and rectify them” (McDaniel 89). Susan Howard agrees, identifying several compelling ways in which *Potter* “works as a postcolonial slave narrative,” especially as it seems to share in the original slave narratives’ purpose: “to convince an audience of the evils of slavery and the necessity of ending it” (37). Indeed, the elevated tone and deepened urgency with which the narrative treats the house-elf subplot across its later books supports McDaniel’s and Howard’s readings. Their argument seems well confirmed at the Battle of Hogwarts, when S.P.E.W., in McDaniel’s sense, completes its work; Ron, usually sharply dismissive of Hermione’s house-elf advocacy, finally “gets” the problematic nature of the house-elves’ inability to disobey their masters in a time of war (*Hallows* 502). (At this moment, Rowling brings the arc of her sub-plot regarding the rights and dignity of house-elves to a close, and seals it with a kiss—Ron and Hermione’s first.)

Third, not only are ethical concerns over these servants raised by the narrative: in *Harry Potter*, as in classic science fiction, it falls to an empathetic female character to raise such concerns. Hermione’s quest for house-elf liberation is a lonely one; she faces pushback from a range of characters throughout the novels for pointing out the ethical dilemmas house-elves present and for inciting house-elves to seek their own freedom. Of course, Hermione is not totally alone. Harry frees Dobby in *Chamber of Secrets*, and Dumbledore appears to agree with Hermione in *Order of the Phoenix*, implying that, had Sirius been kinder to Kreacher, the pathetic old elf may not have betrayed him, resulting in Sirius’s death (834). Still, Dumbledore does not free the house elves under his command; indeed it is difficult to see how Hogwarts could run without them, and Green points to Dumbledore’s attitude toward house-elves as evidence that “the reliance on slavery for the performance of mundane and undesirable tasks proves embedded into the Wizarding psyche.” Hermione, a

Muggle-born—and more importantly to the servant-creature trope, a female—remains the sole voice in the narrative in support of total house-elf liberation.⁸

Fourth, like robots, and especially like the droids of *Star Wars*, house-elves serve as “secret keepers” for their families as an expression of loyalty. Dobby desperately wanted to share the Malfoys’s full plans to open the Chamber of Secrets with Harry, but he was unable; even the little he revealed compelled him to self-harm. Winky kept the terrible secret of Barty Crouch Jr.’s escape from Azkaban, even after her dismissal from the Crouch family’s service (*Goblet* 382). Kreacher, although personally loyal to pure-blood families, was magically bound not to reveal the Order of the Phoenix’s location and plans because of his superseding loyalty to the master of his house: Sirius, the last of the Black family line (*Order* 831). In their role as secret-keepers also, house-elves mirror the science fiction trope of the created servant, programmed, as it were, for loyal discretion.

But there exists another parallel between droids and house-elves in their shared role not just a secret keepers but as preservers of memory. Our understanding of the character of Regulus Black would be paltry without Kreacher’s memories, and Kreacher’s defiance of Voldemort at the Battle of Hogwarts is greatly enhanced in its significance by our sharing in his memory of what happened at the cave. And if Kreacher hadn’t kept his eye on that “heavy locket none of them could open” (*Order* 116) as Molly Weasley and the children cleaned 12 Grimmauld Place in Book Five, Harry and friends might still be looking for the locket Horcrux. Kreacher preserves his family’s heritage by filching the locket, and his commitment to preserving the Black family’s memories plays a role in Voldemort’s ultimate defeat.

House-elves echo and amplify yet another aspect of robots in classic science fiction: an underestimation by humans which often works in robots’ favor. Kellner notes that wizards routinely fail to see house-elves as intelligent beings, and “that is why when Dobby [...] slips away to warn Harry in *Chamber of Secrets* of the Malfoys’ sinister plans, the same Malfoys do not suspect [...] because they do not for a moment think that he is capable of such actions” (Kellner 371). Voldemort’s assumption of house-elves’ magical insignificance

⁸ Janet Brennan Croft points out “The female character who recognizes and champions the personhood of the servant/robot/house-elf is exactly paralleled by the actions of Adora Belle Dearheart in the Terry Pratchett [*Discworld*] novels, who founds the Golem Trust to assist them in their quest for freedom and self-determination” (“MS #2181”). A further exploration of this intriguing parallel falls outside the scope of this essay, focused as it is on science fiction’s influence on *Harry Potter*, because Pratchett’s *Discworld* novels fall into the fantasy genre. However, this and other *Potter-Discworld* parallels form a promising area for further exploration.

and disposability leads him to bring an elf along to test his entrapments at the cave (*Hallows* 193), and this involvement of Kreacher (and Kreacher's unanticipated escape) make the elf privy to essential details Regulus needs to steal the locket. Also in *Hallows*, when Harry and friends find themselves captive in the cellar of Malfoy Manor, Luna tells them "The cellar is completely escape-proof. I tried, at first. Mr. Ollivander has been here for a long time, he's tried everything" (466). But the Death Eaters upstairs fail to factor in house-elf magic, and Dobby answers Harry's plea for help, returning to his old Masters' house once again, in service to a new master: his friend, Harry Potter (467). Here Dobby plays the Golem's role of heroic protector of a persecuted community, giving his life, even, for their freedom and safety (385). As in classic works of science fiction, this underestimation allows him (and his friends) to achieve the unexpected.

There may remain a lingering objection to my argument that the construal of house-elves in *Harry Potter* becomes fully coherent as it relates to the tradition of robots in classic science fiction, and that objection relates to an important difference between house-elves and robots: house-elves are not *made* by witches and wizards, in the literal sense of the term, as are robots, or even Golems. Gupta, contrasting house-elves with the lower castes engineered for manual labor within Huxley's *Brave New World*, stresses that house-elves are *natural* creatures and thus "do not quite fit into that variety of futuristic reflection on the condition of our world" (119) that robots represent. This rings true, in a material sense. However, house-elves are "created" or "engineered" in another sense—one related to the societal constructs that govern the wizarding world, and the narrative firmly supports this reading. The Fountain of Magical Brethren, which Harry sees in his first trip to the Ministry in Book Five, serves as a symbol of these social constructs, and its symbolism is two-fold. On one hand, it represents the human ideal of magical society, the "harmony that is achieved through the dominant, protective leadership of humans and the grateful, obedient support of nonhuman magical creatures" (McDaniel 63). But Howard points out its name is ironic; "Brethren" implies equality, yet the statue depicts the social hierarchy and inherent colonialism which structures the wizarding world (37), and this other meaning is not lost on Harry. When Harry leaves the Ministry after his trial, he looks closer at the statue, and sees the wizard not as handsome but as "weak and foolish," the witch as "wearing a vapid smile" and the adoring expressions of the goblin and centaur as in conflict with his own observations of these creatures' attitudes toward humans (*Order* 156). "Harry realizes that these statues present a fiction: goblins and centaurs do not simply bow to the dominion of wizarding folk, and in believing that they do (or should) witches and wizards reveal their own foolishness" (McDaniel 64). Dumbledore affirms Harry's instincts at the end of *Order*: "The fountain we

destroyed tonight told a lie. We wizards have mistreated and abused our fellows for too long, and we are now reaping our reward" (834). Even more pointedly, when Harry argues that Kreacher is to blame for Sirius' death, Dumbledore tells Harry that "Kreacher is what he has been made by wizards [...] Yes, he is to be pitied" (832). Even Kreacher's name, conspicuous among the other house-elves' diminutive monikers, is highly suggestive; while certain characters (even the majority of house-elves themselves) believe that house-elves are "creatures" who willingly live to serve, the overriding message of the story is that they do so in conformity with societal constructs over which they have no power, and because of this, their situation lacks justice and dignity. Kreacher's nastiness, prejudice, back-history of abuse by wizards, and ultimate response to kindness are patent illustrations of the fetid state of wizarding affairs with regard to his kind. "Oh, don't you see, now, how sick it is," Hermione cries in *Deathly Hallows*, "the way they've got to obey?" (197) Thus, despite this material objection that house-elves are not "made" as Golems and robots are, the servant-creature trope in science fiction still finds faithful iteration in Kreacher and his fellow house-elves in *Harry Potter*.

CONCLUSION

In their creation for service to humans, in the murky ethical questions their existence prompts, in the female characters who empathize with them and incite them to rebel, in their role as secret-keepers and preservers of memory, and in their assumed insignificance that allows them to achieve the unexpected, created servants form an important, memorable and beloved trope of classic science fiction. The house-elves of *Harry Potter*, those unwitting descendants of literary robots, have vaulted the trope beyond the sphere of science fiction. They reinforce the trope's distinctive features, perhaps even influencing the depiction of robots in more contemporary works, like droids L3-37 and BB-8 in recent *Star Wars* films. No matter the genre in which they appear, servant-creatures—from Golems to Rossum's *roboti* to R2-D2 and C-3P0 to Dobby, Winky, and Kreacher—have and continue to fascinate audiences with their ironic humanity, moral complexity, and narrative charm.

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