

## **Abstract | Biological Homunculus, Mystical Golem, Technological Robot**

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Ted Chiang’s “Seventy-Two Letters” weaves together the homunculus, the golem, and the robot – all arguably presented as automata – with the single thread of graphemes. Traditionally, of the three, only the golem is effected with and affected by letters. In this story’s world, however, nomenclature powers the homunculus and the robot as well.

I approach my analysis of Chiang’s tale by considering a speculative fiction trope: unit recombination. This trope manifests when shuffled units of expression – the basic building blocks of an entity – play an integral part in a narrative. For example, Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Library of Babel” posits a library that contains all possible combinations of a set of orthographic symbols, Isaac Asimov tells of several robots, each programmed with assorted combinations of instructions, and X-Men superheroes are characterized by their mutations – the different combinations of genes in their makeup.

In “Seventy-Two Letters,” shuffled units are cast beyond their conventional containers: instead of being animated by programming, robots are instructed by recombined letters; rather than manipulating homunculi with chemicals or biological matter, characters attempt to impact them with a carefully chosen name. The resulting seamless intertwining of evolutionary science, mysticism, and technology provides a fascinating and comprehensive perspective on cultural representations of automata.