

Rise of the Robot: A Historical Perspective on the Evolution of the Robot Other in Literature

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Abstract

The English word 'robot' is a fairly new one, popularized by Karl Čapek in his 1921 play, *R.U.R.* (Rossum's Universal Robots). It comes from the Czech 'robota', meaning "the work of a drudge" or "drudgery". The play depicts a race of man-made androids, a new servant class that ultimately revolts and exterminates its human masters. In this way, the narrative re-enacts a sort of Biblical Fall (and Rise) of Man. The robot is both the human reborn in Eden, and also the ultimate product of the Original Sin of Man. Čapek's robot has inextricably rooted itself in science fiction; we might not instantly pinpoint what it is about the robot—or android or cyborg, Dalek or Cylon—that is so compelling, but there is an undeniable appeal, an anxiety that we feel toward these depictions of artificial humanity.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the idea of the robot precedes the coinage of its name. Early modern literature and proto-science fiction are consumed with a preoccupation of the artificial human: the 'robot other'. Beginning with these early representations of the robot—as golems, automatons and Frankensteinian monsters—I will explore the reasons why the robot other is both irresistible and terrifying, intimately familiar and utterly alien. This paper will trace the literary history of the robot other from the early modern into the twenty-first century.

Key Words: Robots, automatons, androids, humans, literary criticism, other, Milton, Spenser, Karel Čapek, Philip K. Dick, Battlestar Galactica.

1. Identity: An Idea

I want to discuss an *idea*. It is not a new idea. In fact, one might say it is positively *antique*, traced back to the dusty annals of classical literature and beyond.¹ It is an idea that recurs in every period throughout history, as civilizations develop new understandings of the universe and how we, as humans, exist within it. It is the idea of the 'artificial human', and all that such a paradox implies. The literary representations of the artificial human have borne many names over time; in the ancient tradition, they were living statues imbued with the breath of the gods. The spirit-possessed automaton of medieval romance gave way to the mechanically animated automaton of the Renaissance. Advancing into the modern age, new terms were coined: the android, the robot, the cyborg. As the mirrors of man, each one of these names finds new ways to challenge what it means to be human. I would like to suggest another name for the artificial human that includes

all of these situated types, while emphasizing the way in which they both define and reflect the human: the *robot other*.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a particular lens with which to explore the idea of the artificial, rather than to tease out the many implications of each representation or to linger on a particular period in time. My introduction of the robot other will, I hope, inspire further research of its countless manifestations. The Renaissance, with its introduction to new ways of thinking about technology, marks a distinct split between ancient and modern conceptions of the robot other, and as such serves as a useful starting point. For this reason, I begin my survey in the early modern period, and will move forward to the present day.

2. The Yron Groome

In *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser's Talus is a curious mixture of mythic monster and early modern mechanics, a cybernetic organism with an ancient ancestry. The iron man's literary antecedents are described by no less than Plato, Hesiod, Apollonius of Rhodes and Apollodorus². Spenser acknowledges this heritage while distinguishing his Talus from these ancestors of a bygone age: "For from the golden age, that first was named, / It's now at earst become a stonie one."³ Talus is a modern war-machine; not bronze like the Guardian of Crete, but iron and "immouable, resistlesse, without end"⁴. In truth, while Talus behaves more like the classical automata from which he is derived than the mechanical men of the Age of Reason, he embodies many of the common tropes that define later representations of the robot other. As robot other, Spenser's Talus evokes the tensions between master and slave, man-made technology and divine magic, passion and pure, pitiless reason.

Any understanding of a robot other begins with a comparison to its human counterpart. In *Faerie Queene*, Talus' counterpart is Sir Artegall, the Knight of Justice and the iron man's inherited master. Talus was originally servant to a goddess, Astraea, the personification of Justice—her "groome" made of "yron mould"⁵. As a champion of Justice, Artegall is not unexceptional, however; Spenser places him in company with Hercules as a subduer of "monstrous tyrants"⁶, and thanks to the training he receives from Astraea, he is matchless in his might and morality, feared even by the "wilde beasts"⁷. Talus is described in much the same way, mercilessly committed to the cause of Justice. From the outset, there seems to be small distinction between Artegall and Talus, besides Talus' metal body and the difference in class status. But, with each new encounter, their personalities diverge to reveal unique characteristics. In the first canto, Spenser demonstrates Talus' superhuman speed when he pursues—and overtakes—a mounted knight while on foot.⁸ Later on, Talus also demonstrates superhuman abilities of strength, smell, and the uncanny sense to detect falsehoods.⁹ Moreover, Talus displays an almost total lack of empathy, coupled with a disturbing exercise

of autonomy; repeatedly, he takes cruel measures in punishing evil-doers, occasionally to Artegall's dismay.¹⁰ This is particularly evident in the final canto, when Talus takes on the Grantorto's army single-handedly: "But Talus sternely did vpon them set, / And brusht, and batted them without remorse... That they lay scattred ouer all the land, / As thicke as doth the seede after the sowers hand."¹¹ Seeing this, Artegall orders Talus to stop; the knight had hoped to defeat Grantorto in single combat, and so the slaughter of the tyrant's men is both needless and regrettable.

While Talus possesses physical and sensory abilities beyond even those of a mighty champion of Justice, he is forced to obey his own programming, which prohibits him from operating outside the letter of the law. In Canto VII, Talus is powerless to rescue Artegall from Radigund because his master was legally taken prisoner, due to the contract Artegall had made with the Amazon. Humans, on the other hand, are capable of wickedness—and sometimes this ability serves a greater good, like when Britomart violates the contract and rescues Artegall from the Amazons. Talus also lacks the emotional capacity to show mercy or to possess an understanding for the value of human life. This can lead to unfortunate results and disturb us in its violence, not to mention the way in which it challenges the master/servant relationship, but sometimes it also has benefits for the cause of Justice: In Canto II, after Talus slays an evil giant, the giant's followers rise up against the two heroes. Artegall is reluctant to fight, either out of disdain for spilling their "base blood", a fear of shaming himself by fleeing, or pity for killing men who know no better, and instead has Talus parley a "truce for to desire"¹². This has predictable results, in which Talus proceeds to disperse the mob with his "yron flail"¹³. Immune to the uniquely human passions of pride, shame and pity, Talus is capable of taking action without repercussion. In this way, Artegall and Talus function symbiotically, rather than in opposition. Only together are they capable of the responsibility of meting justice in a world fallen from grace.

3. Milton's Adam, Proto-Cartesian

Paradise Lost may seem a strange choice in a discussion of artificial humanity. After all, what can be more authentically human than the first human? Traditionally, Miltonists have described the universe before the Fall as monist, in which the mind and body are continuous with each other and their environment. We were once one with God in Paradise, and the dualism of mind and body that allow us to define human consciousness as exceptional and which we associate with Cartesianism is, in fact, a reflection of our fallen state.¹⁴ René Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am," and Milton scholars rarely hesitate to point out how Satan echoes him: "The mind is its own place."¹⁵ However, the creation of Adam by God follows a pattern common in narratives of the robot other; the maker makes an image of itself, and the image achieves agency and selfhood only when it attempts

to become its maker's equal. An argument can be made that, before the Fall, Adam is artificial, and only after the Fall does he become truly human.

After hand-crafting Adam in His own image, God performs a Turing Test on his latest invention; He converses with Adam in order to determine whether or not the man can imitate His divine intelligence.¹⁶ Adam wishes for "rational delight"¹⁷, which the animals—mere automatons all, lacking self-awareness—cannot provide; and God is pleased with his invention. But despite this evidence of autonomous thought, Adam can be observed acting unconsciously; even in the instant when he first becomes aware, Adam moves by reflex: "By quick instinctive motion up I sprung."¹⁸ Unlike the animals in Eden, Adam was not spontaneously generated from the soil, but manufactured personally by God in His image.¹⁹ In other words, Adam is the *only* authentically "artificial animal" in Eden. As Scott Maisano puts it, "the *sine qua non* of our existence", before the Fall, is "the fact that we are living images, flesh-and-blood imitations."²⁰

A study of Adam as robot other, therefore, would require a comparison of him before and after he eats of the Tree of Knowledge. As has been noted above, prelapsarian Adam convincingly imitates God in his desire for intelligent conversation, rules over the other beasts of Eden as God's substitute, and yet moves innocently—unconsciously—through Paradise as the animals do. In Book IX, however, Satan succeeds in tempting Eve to taste the forbidden fruit, and Eve in turn convinces Adam, who will not be parted from his wife—and both are transformed, body and mind. After eating, he is overcome with a carnal desire for Eve and acts upon lust. He falls into a troubled sleep "with conscious dreams / Encumberd"²¹. Upon waking, he feels shame for the first time and is compelled to cover his nakedness. Both sit and weep, as "high Winds worse within / Began to rise, high Passions, Anger, Hate, Mistrust, Suspicion, Discord, and shook sore / Thir inward State of Mind"²²; the monism known in Adam's innocence as God's creation has been replaced by the psycho-physical dualism of the troublingly self-aware, conflicted, postlapsarian human condition. The human is thus defined by these flaws that make him self-aware, while prelapsarian Adam—a robot other—is defined by his innocence and his imitation of real intelligence.

4. Androids: Vaucanson's Flutist and Kempelen's Turk

While Descartes' philosophy split the physical from the psychological by reducing the human body to mere machine, Julien Offray de La Mettrie reunited them by making of all human functions matter in motion. In 1748, La Mettrie published *L'Homme Machine*, in which he stripped away the numinous by reframing the "soul" as the organically-motivated mind: "if what thinks in my brain is not a part of that organ and thus of the whole body, why, when I am lying peacefully in my bed and I... follow an abstract line of reasoning, does my blood heat up?"²³

Thus, it is not surprising that the Enlightenment gave rise to a host of mechanical men unlike any of those before seen in literature or in life. Jacques de Vaucanson, whom La Mettrie named "a new Prometheus",²⁴ is the most notable of the period's mechanicians. Vaucanson's automaton flute player was so popular that it features at length in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, in the entry for the term "*androïde*", which defined the term as, "an automaton in human form, which, by means of certain well-positioned springs, etc. performs certain functions which externally resemble those of man."²⁵ In this definition the dismissal of any metaphysical origin is evident; these are mechanical replicas of the infinitely more complex human machine.

Vaucanson's flutist and its mimickry of physical process was followed by Wolfgang Von Kempelen's automaton chess-player, which sought to imitate human thought. But unlike the flutist, the chess-player was shrouded in mystery and stagecraft, for it relied on audience members to imbue it with the agency they both craved and feared to witness. According to an account by Poe, Kempelen's chess-player was arrayed in the foreign finery and bore the dusky complexion of a Turk;²⁶ this image evoked the mysteries of the Orient and emphasized its otherness to western audiences.²⁷ Rather than reaffirm the audience's wonder at the fabulous mechanism that is the human body, the Turk had an alienating effect, playing on the anxieties of those who saw it by suggesting the human mind could just as easily be manufactured.

5. Monsters, Lovers and Revolutionaries

The gothic aligns itself perfectly with the anxieties embodied in Kempelen's Turk. This is no more evident than in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where a man, using the modern science of galvanism, produces an animated humanoid. This is not the mechanical android that captured the imagination of the Enlightenment, but something far more complex; a mummy,²⁸ a monster, constructed of disparate parts and dead flesh, animated with electricity. A study of the monster-as-robot-other would identify Victor, its maker, as its human counterpart. What makes *Frankenstein* such a fascinating narrative is that the uniquely human qualities witnessed in Victor's behaviour are also evident in the monster: (1) self-awareness,²⁹ (2) a capacity for feeling/sympathy,³⁰ (3) an appreciation of beauty,³¹ (4) a thirst for knowledge,³² (5) a need for companionship,³³ (6) a desire to leave a legacy.³⁴ A number of these qualities are lacking from both Milton's Adam and Spenser's Talus, but by the time Shelley is writing, these are all characteristics that, disturbingly, can be embodied in an artificial human. Ultimately, the only distinguishing characteristic between Victor and the monster is the ability to *fulfill* a desire for companionship; in this, the monster appears absolutely cursed, no doubt to the relief of 19th century readers.

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève Future* takes a different tack to arrive at the same threshold. Hadaly is a mechanical android that far surpasses her human

model, a beguiling yet shallow, bourgeois simpleton. She replaces her human counterpart as the lover of Lord Ewald, imitating so precisely both her model's physical beauty and Ewald's romantic sensitivities in ways he had only dared hope. But before Hadaly can consummate her relationship, she is destroyed in an all-consuming fire—an act of Fate, as the title of the concluding chapter implies.³⁵ The tone of the narrative suggests that this is tragedy—not in the way that *Frankenstein* tragically portrays Victor's just punishment for his hubris, but tragic because Ewald and Edison both lost a life they dearly loved.

Rossum's Universal Robots, or *R.U.R.*, published in 1921 by Karel Čapek, captures at once the wonder and the anxiety we have witnessed in representations of the robot other, and finally fulfills the transformation the robot other promises. The play's protagonist, Helena, seeks to emancipate the slavish androids that have replaced the world's menial workforce. She visits the company factory, and what follows is a fascinating commentary on the human condition. Is what makes us human happiness? Fear? Suffering? Sex? The desire for autonomy? The ability to kill? Eventually, the robots throw down their tools and take up weapons. In the final act, after the extermination of mankind, the leader of the robots says, "We were machines, sir. But terror and pain have turned us into souls."³⁶ He desires to leave a legacy: "Teach us to have children so that we may love them."³⁷ The play concludes hopefully by re-enacting the moment of creation, transforming Čapek's robots into prelapsarian humans.³⁸

6. The Science Fiction Robot

The population of robot others has exploded in the 20th and early 21st centuries, invading our literature and pushing back the boundaries of what constitutes the human. One text that captures all of the confusions embodied in the robot is Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. Dick's fiction is filled with fundamentally flawed humans that seem to lack that single integrating quality for them to feel whole—whether it be empathy for other living creatures, control over ones urges, or a selfless awareness of others. When Dick introduces "andys" that convincingly imitate these qualities, the whole notion of what constitutes humanity, at least psychically, is thrown into question. Dick imagines a future where moods can be synthesized through the use of machines, blurring the line between authentic and artificial emotion;³⁹ in a reality where the fake is indistinguishable from the genuine article, does it even matter whether or not it's artificial? The one distinguishing feature between humans and andys is empathy, or as I have referenced it previously, capacity for feeling or value for life. Spenser's Talus had no such compunction, and at the outset of Dick's novel, Rick Deckard believes that to be the case with the andys. But, at every turn, Deckard's belief is challenged, as he repeatedly confuses humans with androids⁴⁰. In the novel, the robot other has evolved to the point where it has infiltrated the human race,

subverting it from the inside—a far more insidious threat than the unsubtle revolution of Rossum's robots.

The division between human and other completely disintegrates with the 2004-2009 TV series, *Battlestar Galactica*. Years after the war with humanity's colonies, the cylons—robots much like those Čapek envisioned—return to supplant it, and promulgate their race. This time, they have perfected the imitation of organic human life, cloning artificial human models, and embedding them in human society. The cylons are motivated by one overwhelming desire to leave a genetic legacy. In time, this desire is shared by the human survivors, who want nothing more than to find a habitable planet where they can rebuild their civilization, safe from the invasion of artificial others. Ultimately, salvation lies in their merging, rather than the dominion of one side over the other; in the final episode, Hera—the hybrid child of cylon Athena and human Helo, the only offspring of the cylon race—is revealed to be 'Mitochondrial Eve', the mother of humanity on Earth. This narrative suggests that, like Milton's prelapsarian Adam, we are *all* artificial.⁴¹

7. What's in a Name?

This paper is about putting a name to an idea. Many minds have addressed these same issues over the centuries: What constitutes humanity? And how do we express it? Some have done so through philosophical rhetoric, some with scientific premises, and yet others using literary expression. I have presented an evolution of representations that capture these issues, and in so doing, proposed a term to consider such representations as a whole. The robot other embodies the idea of the artificial human, and the ways in which it reflects our humanity back at us. The robot other is no less than an archetype, and it is only by knowing our archetypes that we can better understand ourselves.

Notes

¹ J. Douglas Bruce, 'Automata in Classical Tradition and Mediaeval Romance', *Modern Philology* 10, no. 4 (1913): 511-526, 512. Bruce indicates that "the earliest human automata in literature" appear in the *Iliad*, xviii. 417 ff., describing Haphaestus's "handmaidens of gold", artificial humans with the "semblances of living maids".

² Bruce, 'Automata in Classical Tradition', 513-514.
Lynsey McCulloch, 'Antique Myth, Early Modern Mechanism: The Secret History of Spenser's Iron Man', *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Wendy Beth Hyman. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 61-76, 64-67.

³ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, V.Proem.2.

⁴ Ibid., V.i.12.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., V.i.2.

⁷ Ibid., V.i.8.

⁸ Ibid., V.i.20.

⁹ Ibid., V.ii.

¹⁰ Michael West, 'Spenser's Art of War: Chivalric Allegory, Military Technology, and the Elizabethan Mock-Heroic Sensability', *Renaissance Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (1988): 654-704, 665-671.

¹¹ Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, V.xii.7.

¹² Ibid., V.ii.52.

¹³ Ibid., V.ii.53.

¹⁴ Bruce Smith, 'Hearing Green', *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion*, eds. Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 147-149.

Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 246.

Scott Maisano, 'Descartes avec Milton: The Automata in the Garden', *The Automaton in English Renaissance Literature*, ed. Wendy Beth Hyman. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 21-44, 23-27.

¹⁵ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I.254.

¹⁶ Ibid., VIII.369-448.

Maisano, 'Descartes avec Milton', 27-33.

¹⁷ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, VIII.391.

¹⁸ Ibid., VIII.259.

¹⁹ Ibid., VII.524-528.

²⁰ Maisano, 'Descartes avec Milton', 30.

²¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IX.1050-1051.

²² Ibid., IX. 1122-1125.

²³ Ann Thomson, ed., *Machine Man and Other Writings*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 29. For a history of the Enlightenment debates surrounding the human condition and the challenge posed by increasingly sophisticated humanoid machines, see Eric G. Wilson, *Melancholy Android*, 97-103.

²⁴ Thomson, *Machine Man and Other Writings*, 34.

²⁵ 'Androïde', *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, Eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond D'Alembert. (1751; Reprint,

- University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, 2011), <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>.
- Gaby Wood, *Edison's Eve: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life*. (New York: Anchor Books, 2003.), 21-22.
- ²⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, 'Maelzel's Chess-Player', *The Unabridged Edgar Allan Poe*, (1836; Reprint, Philadelphia: Running Press, 1983): 270-289.
- ²⁷ Martin Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters and Machines: Science Fiction and the Cultures of Science in the Nineteenth Century*. (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006.), 32-35.
- ²⁸ Wilson, *Melancholy Android*, 28. Wilson defines "the mummy" as "an android made of dead things", which represents a desire for physical life.
- ²⁹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*. (1831; Reprint, New York: Dover Classics, 1994). Characterized by Victor: 34. Embodied by monster: 90-97, 163-165.
- ³⁰ Ibid. Characterized by Victor: 45. Embodied by monster: 71-72, 75, 77-81, 164.
- ³¹ Ibid. Characterized by Victor: 18, 45, 64. Embodied by monster: 71-72, 75, 77-81, 164.
- ³² Ibid. Characterized by Victor: 18-19. Embodied by monster: 90-97, 163-165.
- ³³ Ibid. Characterized by Victor: 108. Embodied by monster: 90-97.
- ³⁴ Ibid., Characterized by Victor: 32. Embodied by monster: 121-122.
- ³⁵ Robert Martin Adams, trans. *Tomorrow's Eve*. (1886; Reprint, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 218.
- ³⁶ Karel Čapek, *R.U.R and The Insect Play*. (1921; Reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 95.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 95.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 104.
- ³⁹ Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. (1968; Reprint, New York: Random House, 1996), 3-7.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 48-60, 94, 129-144.
- ⁴¹ 'Daybreak (Part Two)', (4.20). *Battlestar Galactica: Season 4.5*, dir. Michael Rymer. (Vancouver, BC: Universal Studios, 2009)
Roz Kaveney and Jennifer Stoy, eds. *Battlestar Galactica: Investigating Flesh, Steel and Spirit*. (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010.), 272.

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