

## The Robot Other in Proto-Science Fiction

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The word “robot” comes from the Czech *robota*, meaning “the work of a drudge”, “drudgery”—or, given a particular socio-historical context, “serf labour”. It was coined in Karel Čapek’s 1921 play, *R.U.R. (Rossum’s Universal Robots)*, which depicted a race of man-made androids, a new servant class that ultimately revolted and exterminated its human masters. At the time, the play served as a rather ham-fisted political critique of capitalism, while the narrative re-enacted 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. What is unique about Čapek’s robot is how that figure has inextricably rooted itself in modern 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 perhaps comes as no surprise, then, that the idea of the robot precedes the coinage of its name. Proto-science fiction is consumed with a preoccupation of the artificial human: what I call the ‘robot other’. In this paper I will explore these early representations of the robot, and why the robot other is both irresistible and terrifying, intimately familiar and utterly alien. To set the stage, I will introduce two competing nineteenth century traditions that inform the birth of the proto-science fictional robot: the mysterious performative art known as *mesmerism* and the empirical approach to inquiry we refer to as *scientific method*. I will explore several early texts inspired by these traditions that confront the robot other, and what they suggest about our preoccupation with artificiality.

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