Fugitive Figures: On the Modes of Existence of Medieval Automata

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When it comes to the creation of automata, few imaginations were as fecund as those of twelfth-century writers—not smiths or illusionists or engineers, but writers. Free of the obligation to draw up plans and forge parts and figure out why they fail to function properly, untroubled by the ravages that might be wrought upon a machine by use or accident or excess of humidity, the authors of early medieval romances indulged their wildest dreams for self-moving mechanisms that imitated bodies born of nature. Some of these automata took the shape of animals or birds, but the most marvelous resembled humans, except that they were visibly, unabashedly better. They were not the replicants we see in Blade Runner, dangerously similar to humans but with more luminous skin. The automata described in medieval romance were made of gold inlaid with enamel and jewels. They could play musical instruments and perform gymnastics and shoot arrows with flawless aim. Their durability and perfection allowed them to serve as perpetual guards at the tombs of heroes and as tutors in courtly behavior for living lords and ladies.

These automata were one historically specific manifestation of a fascination with the mechanism in human form, a fascination evident from Greek antiquity onward and still visible today, particularly in film and television. Theoretical discussions of automata have proliferated recently, inspired by current debates about the human, its place and boundaries and relations with the world. Scholars agree that the automaton derives its fascination from the way it transgresses the
categories that would ordinarily define us as human and allow us to make sense of the world. Thus, for Minsoo Kang in *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (2011), the automaton is a “conceptual tool with which Western culture has meditated on both the possibilities and the consequences of the breakdown of the distinction between the normally antithetical categories of the animate and the inanimate, the natural and the artificial, the living and the dead” (6–7). Kang’s beautiful book pushes beyond the conventional boundaries of the history of science by investigating the idea of the automaton, and it pushes beyond the boundaries of the history of ideas by investigating the cognitive and affective relations that human spectators entertain with these objects. In this way, *Sublime Dreams* opens a new field, the “history of the imagination” (12).

Kang’s study is one of the most sophisticated to date. Yet by emphasizing the difference between the physical object and the idea we form of it, he leaves unquestioned another binary opposition: between the human mind and the rest of the world, and hence between the unreal (i.e., imaginary) object and the real (i.e., material) one. The ontology that underpins his study, as with the studies of automata that have preceded and followed it, is one that can conceive objects only in terms of human access to them, yet attributes “real existence” only to material objects outside the mind. This approach may seem logical, since humans make (or imagine) automata. Yet it is too simple to conceive of technological work as the one-sided story of a human subject/master shaping a material object whose properties the subject fully understands and controls. Gilbert Simondon observed in his classic study, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (1958), that the technical object can never be entirely known (42/39).¹ Similarly, in Bruno Latour’s “scientifiction” *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* (1992), the character of the naive intern protests when the professor character

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¹ I cite theoretical texts from the published translations indicated in the Works Cited. However, for the convenience of readers who have different language editions on their shelves, I give page numbers to both French and English versions, in that order.
begins making up dialogue for parts of a machine. The intern states: “It’s a confusion of genres. . . . Chips don’t talk any more than Chanticleer’s hens do. People make them talk. We do—we’re the real engineers. They’re just puppets, just ordinary things in our hands.” The professor responds: “Then you’ve never talked to puppeteers” (57/59).

These books by Simondon and Latour belong to a lineage of French philosophy that has opened not only a new way to think about technology but also a new ontology, a plurality of modes of being. The lineage can be traced back to Étienne Souriau’s The Different Modes of Existence, a book whose implications were not immediately evident when it was published in 1943. Simondon’s title alludes to Souriau’s, but the former’s understanding of the genesis of technology differs from the latter’s characterization of how objects come into being. It would remain to Bruno Latour to revive the notion of modes of existence in Souriau’s vein, first in the generous introductory essay he coauthored with Isabelle Stengers for the reissue of Souriau’s book in 2009, and then with his own monumental new study, An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns, published in 2012. I do not wish to exaggerate Souriau’s influence on Latour; the Inquiry is the fruit of a project that Latour had begun decades before. In many ways it offers a mature reformulation of a philosophical position that Latour had already begun setting out in his early treatise Irreductions (1984) and the experimental Aramis, before he discovered Souriau. However, taken together with Aramis, The Different Modes of Existence and An Inquiry into Modes of Existence offer a new way to understand automata not as ideas, but as the productions of technological, fictional, and religious being—or to use the notation system of the Inquiry, [TEC], [FIC], and [REL].

What would happen if we approached medieval automata through this new plural ontology and recognized technological, fictional, and religious beings in their specificity? The question may

2 Irreductions was published in French along with Pasteur, guerre et paix des microbes and in English with The Pasteurization of France.
initially strike readers as perverse. The *Blade Runner* films compel us to recognize replicants as fellow persons—these individuals may have been artificially fabricated, but they function biologically, and they are even occasionally capable of reproduction. They possess memories (not their own, but does that matter?) and experience the same emotions as humans. At their death, some spectators weep for them. In contrast, how can a metal figure with elaborate plumbing be considered a “being”? To pose this question, however, is once again to conceive of being through an entirely human lens. Medieval automata are illuminating precisely for the ways in which they are distinct from humans, for the ways in which, however much they may interact with humans, they cannot assimilate to human life or emotional experience.

Furthermore, Latour draws a clear distinction between technological being, the technological object, and the person. Technological being is difficult to discuss because the term does not designate a discrete member of a group of like individuals (as in the expression “human beings”). Instead, as a formative movement, technological being guides the work that transforms different materials (*Inquiry* 225–30/221–26). The technological object is merely the product of technological being; and the moment the object’s fabrication is complete, it passes over into a different mode of existence, Reproduction [REP]. Thus, technological being recedes from view. Because the romances devote most of their description to the completed objects and their mechanized actions, they conceal [TEC] and require readers to respond to these objects as we would to those other creations of romance: characters. That is, the romances make the automata function through the mode of [FIC]—the same mode in which all technological objects begin their existence, for projects and schemes are also the domain of [FIC]. Nonetheless, the desire that these automata can elicit suggests that they encourage category mistakes. Such mistakes occur at the crossing of different

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3 Latour concentrates on distinguishing [TEC] and [FIC] in the *Inquiry* (251–53/248–49), but the dependency of [TEC] on [FIC] is implicit, and he had already made it explicit in *Aramis* (27/23).
modes of existence, where it becomes tempting for us to measure one mode according to the principles of measurement of another. In Latour’s system, love is proper to the religious mode [REL], which is alone capable of creating persons. When characters or readers or viewers strive to recognize automata as persons (just as the Blade Runner films encourage viewers to do), they commit a category mistake. In other words, the automata in medieval romances occupy a triple crossing of [TEC], [FIC], and [REL]. From this crossing they derive their oddly fugitive nature and their power to trouble us.

The present essay elaborates this triple crossing through an interpretation of early medieval romances. Because the genre first developed in the twelfth century in the courts of France and Anglo-Norman England, all the texts I shall discuss were written in Old French. I shall begin with an overview of automata in medieval Western Europe, both fictional and mechanical (some automata were designed and constructed in the late Middle Ages), as well as the scholarly treatment they have received to date. The interplay between textuality and technology that emerges from this overview will allow me to situate romance, not in relation to the truth/fiction binary, but as a scientifiction avant la lettre. This genre, invented by Latour for Aramis, escapes the binary of truth and fiction and thus allows us to think in new ways about the relation between imaginary worlds and reality. I shall then turn to a romance in miniature, the Conte de Floire et Blancheflor (ca. 1150). This text recounts the trials and tribulations of two young lovers, the titular characters. The description of automata on the tomb of Blancheflor exemplifies the advent or “instauration” of new being (according to Souriau’s formulation) and lends itself to explication through the technological and fictional modes, [TEC] and [FIC], that Latour describes in the Inquiry. But as a spectator, Floire’s response to these automata is extreme: he nearly kills himself. In fact, this moment in the romance suggests that love, too, must be taken into account when discussing the productions of technology and fiction. That insight is appropriately Latourian because it can be connected to Aramis, but
medieval romance offers a basis to elaborate this amatory experience more fully. Therefore, in the concluding section, I shall consider a passage from one of the several early romance adaptations of the legendary adventures and exploits of Alexander the Great. Alexandre de Paris’s Roman d’Alexandre, a lengthy narrative published sometime in the 1180s, recounts the visit of Alexander’s army to a forest inhabited by girls born from flowers, guarded by two golden automata. This odd passage allows us to witness the disappearing act that is proper to the technological mode after instauration, but the flower-girls also further complicate any reflection on the affective responses that these modes elicit and their relation to the religious mode. Thus, at the end of this itinerary we shall be able to consider a human subject more fully. This subject is constituted through the modes of [TEC], [FIC], and [REL], yet in the end s/he gazes upon the productions of technological and fictional being with a longing they will never fully requite.

The Romance of Technology

Automata often appear in twelfth-century romance at moments of stasis or impasse in the narrative. The ekphrasis (a verbal description of visual art) that a narrator devotes to an automaton allows for a pause, a moment of reflection on either a life ended or a relationship thwarted, before the plot is relaunched in a new direction. Hence the frequency with which automata appear on the tombs of heroes, such as the golden archer that guards the tomb of Camille (7695–711) in the anonymous Roman d’Eneas (ca. 1160) and the effigy on the tomb of Hector (16635–814) in Benoît de Sainte-Maure’s Roman de Troie (ca. 1165).⁴ Both characters are mythical warriors destined to die before the end of the narratives in which they appear, and they deserve commemoration. The duplicitous tomb of Blancheflor, a character who is not really dead, serves a different role: it allows Floire to prove the

⁴ For the romances, references are to line numbers unless otherwise indicated and translations are my own.
depth of his love, and his reaction moves the plot forward (543–66). Blancheflor is not the only still-living character to be replicated by an automaton, for Queen Iseut and her lady-in-waiting Brangien share this fate in Thomas d’Angleterre’s version of the Roman de Tristan et Iseut (1173). Thomas recounts how the multitalented Tristan, driven into exile, creates replicas of the two women in a grotto so that he can interact with them. When Tristan’s friend falls in love with the image of Brangien, these statues will inspire a peripeteia (Turin fragment 1–56). Characters can not only fall in love with automata, they can be governed by them, as the Trojan lords and ladies in Benoît’s romance seem to be when, earlier in the story, they enter a marvelous alabaster chamber and encounter four automata that entertain, educate, and surveil them. This chamber is likewise described at a moment of stasis, a truce between the warring sides that allows the wounded Hector to undergo surgery within the chamber (as if he himself were the object of the transformative work of engineers; 14657–918). Thus, the episodes of Tristan’s cave and the alabaster chamber exemplify the deeper dynamics that can surface in moments when narrative progress is arrested in favor of ekphrasis: power shifts back and forth between characters and mechanisms in a complex interplay of fiction and technology.

That interplay calls for more detailed examination, but until recent years, these fictional automata had received little scholarly attention. Penny Sullivan published an essay in 1985 that identified the medieval French texts describing automata and argued that these imagined objects express courtly ideals and aspirations. In a chapter of her Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century (2001), Sarah Kay offered a more complex understanding of the mechanisms of the alabaster chamber, showing how they mobilize contraries in ways that push at the very boundaries of art and reason, as those domains were conceptualized in the period (111–21). Still, when E. R. Truitt published Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art in 2015, there remained much to discuss. A historian of science, Truitt makes extensive use of romance, for she
surveys Western Europe from the twelfth century to the end of the Middle Ages, and at the beginning of that period technological capabilities were not equal to the task of building such objects. Half of her book therefore details the automata invented by tale-tellers. She illuminates these mechanisms’ role in marking oppositions (between good and evil, living and dead, natural and artificial) or “commenting” on categories, “often calling them into question by their very existence” (9). More important, she valorizes these romances as a conduit for a technological project. It was romance that transmitted the idea of the automaton, which had really been built in antiquity and in the medieval East, to the medieval West (117–18).

However, Truitt’s understanding of the potential of medieval narrative to transmit such ideas is compromised by the strictly binary approach she takes to classifying texts. She cites Isidore of Seville’s Etymologies in incomplete fashion to suggest that the only distinction of import to medieval rhetoricians was that between fiction and nonfiction (6–7). On the contrary, the rhetorical tradition that Isidore transmits sorted narratives into three kinds: historia (true stories, which one must assume are also plausible), fabula (stories that are neither true nor plausible), and a middle category, argumentum (stories that are untrue but plausible). The rhetorical division of fiction into two kinds highlights the question of plausibility, one that would seem important for reflecting on how fiction might transmit technological projects. Truitt, on the other hand, emphasizes the opposition of fiction and truth because it underpins her historiography. She seeks to trace a trajectory that she names in the title of the penultimate chapter, “From Texts to Technology.” In her assessment, twelfth and thirteenth-century automata existed only as fictional creations (“text”); but in the fourteenth century, artisans acquired the skills to construct mechanisms (“technology”). The chapter

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5 Truitt quotes Isidore’s explanation of the three kinds in her endnotes (157n18) but does not mention argumentum in her discussion (6–7). Isidore’s sources, widely transmitted throughout the Middle Ages, were Cicero’s De inventione I.xix and the Rhetorica ad Herennium (attributed to Cicero in the Middle Ages) I.viii.
therefore examines the earliest mechanisms really built and recorded in medieval Western Europe, the mechanical monkeys, birds, and eventually human figures installed in the pleasure garden at the castle of Hesdin during the reign of Robert II, count of Artois (1250–1302), and his successors. Though these mechanisms crumbled to dust long ago, Truitt traces their construction and maintenance through household account books. Unfortunately, these documentary sources compromise the clear opposition between text and technology in the chapter title. The historian can only access these technologies through text. Even if the “text” of the chapter title is taken (as she probably intends it) to mean “fiction” (as opposed to account books), the title poses problems because she understands fictional automata as a conduit for a real technological project. In this sense, Truitt’s sophisticated intuition about medieval fiction—that it can serve as a space for launching real technological projects—undermines any later attempt to oppose fiction and reality.

At the same time, writing is itself a technology, and the books that have transmitted medieval romances have suffered as much from the ravages of time as the mechanisms at Hesdin. Only within the fiction of the romance were the fictional automata “incorruptible” (Truitt 125), for the parchment leaves on which that fiction was preserved tore or acquired stains or were eaten by worms. Or else they disappeared entirely, for books are small objects, easily disassembled and easily lost. Thomas’s Romance de Tristan et Iseut survives only in fragmentary manuscript copies, and the fragment that described the cave of statues has been lost. As for the tomb descriptions in other romances—more tenacious texts that survive in multiple copies—they are also compromised by the technology of romance writing or the manuscript book. The automata appear on the tomb of Blancheflor only in the “continental” recension of the romance (Conte 8, 122). Camille’s tomb in the Roman de Eneas is surmounted by a lamp with a flame positioned just so that it will be extinguished if the slightest draft of air touches the archer’s bow, which would make him release his arrow, which would dislodge the dove that holds the lamp. “A un softe fust to perdu” (“at a single breath, all
would be lost”; 7712), concludes the narrator, employing the very word that describes the breath we exhale when we speak and thus the action that rendered it possible to read these romances, written before standardized word separation made silent reading possible in the vernacular. Creations of the text, creations of human breath, the automata that receive these elaborate ekphrases almost never reappear in the narrative; we never learn whether the golden archer ever discharged his golden arrow. There is a fragility to the literary automata, in both their transmission and the content of their descriptions, and this fragility mirrors that of the objects in the garden of Hesdin.

Because the automata in the romances and those of Hesdin remain embedded in text, they call for a different understanding of the relation between writing and engineering projects—an understanding that Latour has elaborated in *Aramis*. This book examines what went wrong in the creation of ARAMIS, the *Agencement en Rames Automatisées de Modules Indépendants dans les Stations* ("arrangement in automated trains of independent modules in stations"); 41/40, an innovative project of public transport for the Paris region that remained eighteen years in development (1969–87) but, aside from some prototype cars and tracks, was never built. Aramis also happens to be the name of one of the three musketeers in Alexandre Dumas’s novels, and the first hint of Latour’s playful approach comes in his use of the name for the title of his book, followed by his choice to write it out in the text with only the first letter capitalized, so that it does indeed look like a person’s name rather than an acronym. The name insistently evokes fiction. But for his book, Latour rejects the genre of science fiction (which treats technology as setting rather than plot) as well as the more staid style of journalism (which is “split by the great divide . . . between popularizing technology and denouncing its politics”) and the human sciences (“for it would scarcely be fitting to call the hard sciences into question only in order to start taking the soft ones as dogma”). Instead, he creates the genre of the “scientifiction,” whose elements are true but not plausible (8/ix). He makes no reference to the rhetorical tradition, but in light of the three-way division of narrative cited above,
we could understand scientifiction as a fourth genre, a way to combine truth/untruth and plausibility/implausibility that never occurred to the rhetoricians. As exemplified by Aramis, scientifiction is the compilation of documents related to a technological project (correspondence, interviews, plans, news clippings), woven together with fictional passages that allow various characters (the fictionalized intern and professor, as well as Aramis himself) to speak. This text is “a fiction with ‘variable geometry’” in which the central character, Aramis, begins as a fiction (as all technological projects must) but strives to acquire greater and greater reality. He fails, or, rather, the engineers do. The prosopopoeia of Aramis in the final pages is not, in fact, a way to make him more real, but a demonstration of his continued fictionality. The rhetorical figure expresses the sad surrender of a project that could never move from fiction to reality (238/297).

By representing unrealized potential and implausible projects, scientifiction restores scientific worlds to what they should be: in Latour’s words, “possible worlds in conflict that move and shape one another.” That is, it restores “freedom to all the realities involved before any one of them could succeed in unifying the others” (8/viii–ix). Medieval romance may seem far removed from the heterogeneous compilation of documents in Aramis, but its principle of arrangement is also the joining of discrete elements, to form what Chrétien de Troyes calls a “conjointure” (14). It should be possible, then, to understand technological projects as one of the heterogeneous elements absorbed into romance and thus to read these medieval texts as scientifictions. This task will require us to seek the traces of technological being. However, Aramis will not take us further in this task, for the book’s allusions to ontology or metaphysics remain enigmatic (59/62, 144–45/173, 197/243). We must now turn to An Inquiry into Modes of Existence.
The Beings of Technology and Fiction

The Inquiry elaborates a new ontology that—in Latour’s estimation—will allow us to finally access our values. Part One “makes room” for this new ontology by demolishing the old familiar opposition between subject and object and its various permutations—above all, mind and matter. For Latour, matter is “the most idealist of the products of the mind” (114/106) because it posits a substance that subtends all being and guarantees its continuity. He urges us to replace this ontology of “being-as-being” with an ontology of “being-as-other,” in which all beings demand construction or better “instauration” (166–69/160–64). “Being-as-other” can be understood as a new way of stating Latour’s argument in Irreductions that the real is constituted not by substance or matter but by gradients of resistance and that “actants” or “entelechies” become more resistant by allying themselves with other actants (1.1.5–9).6 Thus “the principal of reality is others” (Irreductions 1.2.7.2).7

At the same time, our habitual distinctions between the real, the unreal, and the possible are mobilized differently. These distinctions no longer qualify or disqualify objects from the realm of existence. Instead, they distinguish the various gradients of resistance, but at any one of those gradients, there is an existing actant of some variety. As Latour had already put it in Irreductions, “There is no difference between the ‘real’ and the ‘unreal,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘possible,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary.’ Rather, there are all the differences experienced between those that resist for long and those that do not” (1.1.5.2). This early text did not speak of “modes of existence,” but it did

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6 I cite Irreductions by section and paragraph numbers. Harman’s Prince of Networks, which illuminated the metaphysics Latour had set out in the books he published before 2000, offers a particularly helpful account of this treatise. However, readers should be aware that the Inquiry, published after Prince of Networks, takes an entirely different tack from the one Harman imagines in his speculative final chapter, “Object-Oriented Philosophy” (151–228).

7 The Sheridan and Law translation of Irreductions is sometimes misleading, and I offer my own translation here. The French reads: “Le principe de réalité, c’est les autres,” which Sheridan and Law have translated “The principle of reality is other people.” That “les autres” sounds like “other people” (“L’enfer, c’est les autres,” wrote Sartre) is surely part of the point, but it only resonates with such piquancy because the Others are more numerous and diverse than the human community.
perform something like a modal differentiation of being. The term “mode” comes from Souriau, whom Latour acknowledges when introducing it in the *Inquiry* (153/146). In the history of philosophy prior to Souriau, the notion of mode had applied only to discourse: it expressed the degree of possibility or necessity of one and the same action, where the infinitive of the verb expressing that action remained the same. Modality was never applied to being itself because the suggestion of impossibility or unreality was thought to disqualify a thing from any claim to being. Souriau’s expression “mode of existence,” as Stengers and Latour note appreciatively in their essay prefacing the new edition, expanded the realm of being and varied its topography by allowing ideas and discourse to accede to the status of being (23). A desired or imagined thing is also an actant, a thing that resists, alongside tables and chairs.

The coming into being of a new actant is “instauration,” a concept that Latour also credits to Souriau in the *Inquiry*. The concept of instauration allows us to recognize as a fallacy the notion that the human artist is the sole creator of a work. Instead, we must recognize the agency of the work that is coming into being, progressively assuming more solidity in alliance with the material and the artist (Souriau’s example, which Latour reuses, is that of the sculptor; Souriau 107–9; Latour, *Inquiry* 166/160–61). Though beings-as-other come in different species, their instauration shares three features: the origin of the action is doubled, dispersed, occluded (as with the French expression *faire faire*, “to have done,” which we shall encounter again below); the direction of the action is uncertain, as between the puppeteer’s hand and the marionette; and the result is submitted to judgment as to its felicity—that is, each instauration obeys certain conditions of veridiction (*Inquiry* 163–65/157–59). People have refused to recognize the constructed nature of all being, according to Latour, because our Judeo-Christian or Judeo-Greek heritage has endowed us with an anti-idolatry that makes it impossible for us to acknowledge that even the One God requires instauration. Hence
“iconoclasm has become our cult” (Inquiry 172/167), extending to all corners of our thought and practice, an abiding blindness to the process of making that produces being.

In response, Latour develops a taxonomy of beings-as-other or modes of existence, which begins in Part One with network [NET], reference [REF], and reproduction [REP] and continues in Part Two with metamorphosis [MET], technology [TEC], fiction [FIC], and habit [HAB]. The beings of technology are chains of alterations that share with networks the association of heterogeneous elements, but for the Latour of the Inquiry, the notion of network alone is never adequate to describe anything. What distinguishes the beings of technology from beings of reproduction is the ability to start over several times, to “tinker” if that word could be expanded beyond its current limitation to a human agent. They engage in detour, describing a “dazzling zigzag” (220/216) through a labyrinth of folds among diverse materials. Thus, the beings of technology experience a radical alterity. But this zigzag nonetheless subsides almost instantly into oblivion once it has created a new technical object. The object itself is not the technological being; it is merely the product of that being’s work, and it has now been abandoned. It can only persist in being through the mode of reproduction [REP]. The dependence of technological objects upon [REP] is one source of the fragility of automata, literary or otherwise. Technological being, for its part, “seeks to be forgotten” (221/217)—another source of fragility.

Let us consider a medieval automaton in light of [TEC], the mode of existence of the technological being-as-other. In the Conte de Floire et de Blancheflor, Floire’s father, the pagan king Felis, has remarked on the love between his son and Blancheflor, the daughter of a captive Christian. He cannot approve this love and sends his son away to study and meet other girls. When Floire shows no sign of forgetting Blancheflor, the king resolves on more extreme measures. He will kill the girl. The queen, distraught, prevails upon him merely to sell her into captivity in a distant city. But when Floire’s return is immanent, they must find a way to explain her absence. The queen
suggests a plan: they will claim that the girl is dead, and in order to make this claim more credible and provide comfort to their son, they will raise a tomb for her.

“Sire,” fait ele, “a moi entent: car faisons faire un tombel gent, fais soit de marbre et de cristal, et d’or et d’argent li esmal. ‘Morte est Blancheflor,’ ce dirons et nostre fil conforterons.”

“Dame,” fait il, “tost l’estuet faire, car Flores, çoou saciés, repaire.”

Dont manderent machons vaillans et boins orfevres bien sachans. Faire lor fait un tel tombel, nus hom de char ne vit si bel. (543–54)

“Lord,” she said, “listen to me: let us have a handsome tomb constructed. Let it be made of marble and crystal, with niello upon gold and sliver. ‘Blancheflor is dead,’ we shall say, and we shall comfort our son.” “Lady,” he answered, “we must do it soon, for Floire, as you know, is on his way.” So they sent for worthy masons and skilled goldsmiths. They had them make a more beautiful tomb than any living man had ever seen.

Scholars have interpreted this passage—along with the other artificial objects in the narrative—as commentaries on the reading and writing of romance (Krueger) or as indirect warnings against the way the unrestrained imagination can “pervert both love and the world into cloying facsimile” (Wogan-Browne 21). The notion of instauration, on the other hand, shifts these automata out of the realms of self-reflexive art or suffocating facsimile: it valorizes them as actants whose coming into being does not depend on human intention and whose value must be measured by a different scale. The doubling or occluding of agency proper to all instauration is signaled through the repetition of the expression faire faire (“to have done”; 544, 553), and urgently echoed by the impersonal “l’estuet faire” (“it must be done”; 549). The folding of heterogeneous materials, the detour through radical alterity, is anticipated with the simple list of marble, crystal, gold, and silver; the long description that follows will expand the list (especially 651–60). However, the allusions to judgment introduce a complication. The felicity condition proper to technology is one of good adaptation, proper adjustment, a suitable harmony. The judgments in this passage, however, bear upon something else.
There are two references to the object’s beauty (544, 554). The second of these, “nus hom de char ne vit si bel” (literally, “no man of flesh had ever seen such a beautiful one”) subtly anticipates another element of veridiction that will be expounded in the lines to follow: the metal automata atop the tomb must resemble the lovers. The man of flesh who sees the tomb is at once no man at all (“nus hom”), which is to say all men in general, and a very specific man, Floire, the sole intended audience for this elaborate and expensive monument. Thus, the young man of flesh will see his own image on the tomb beside that of Blancheflor: one of the statues “Flore sanloit/ plus que riens nule qui ja soit” (“resembled Floire more than anything that ever existed”; 577–78).

The question of felicity conditions reveals that automata always involve the crossing of two modes of being: technology [TEC] and fiction [FIC]. Fiction here is not to be understood in opposition to fact or in conjunction with illusion. It has nothing to do with the fact that this is a literary description of an object that was never forged. Rather, fiction consists in “what is fabricated, consistent, real” (Latour, Inquiry 242/238). The error of Modern thinkers (according to Latour) was to celebrate the beings of fiction while denying them any objective reality. They can accede to that reality so long as we reprise them, take them up. Their mode of existence has much in common with that of technical beings, since they, too, arise in folds of raw materials. In fact, the technological mode is almost always involved to some degree in [FIC]; automata merely foreground it. But the beings of fiction produce figures from those materials, vacillating figures that cannot ever detach themselves from the material but cannot be perceived if we focus on it, either (247–48/244). Their veridiction is aesthetic, which requires that they be reprised by the human subjects they create. In this way, their productions are even more fragile than those of technology; for the technological object can at least persist, once created, through the lines of force proper to the mode of reproduction, entirely independent of human action, whereas the fictional creation disappears if it is not taken up again and again by human subjects. But along with this fragility comes ubiquity, for the
beings of fiction exist far beyond the realm of art. They alone make figuration possible, and
figuration alone makes it possible for the other modes to be figured, that is, represented and
understood. In fact, figuration is the precondition for beings of reference [REF] because all beings
of reference began their existence as beings of fiction but were then domesticated to the referential
function.

Thus, in the description of Blancheflor’s tomb, the mode of veridiction, its beauty, has told
us that we are already dealing with the mode of fiction, even before we come to the lines about the
automata. Reading further, we see the emergence of figures from the folds of material:

En la tombe ot .iii. tuiaus
as .iii. cors, bien fais et biaus,
es queus li .iii. vent feroient
cascuns ausi com il ventoient.
Quant li vens les enfans toucoit,
l’un bairoit l’autre et acoloit,
si disoient par ingremance
trestout lor bon et lor enfance.
Ce dist Flores a Blanceflor:
“Basiés moi, bele, par amor.”
Blanceflor respont en baisant:
“Je vos aim plus que riens vivant.” (593–604)

There were four pipes in the four corners of the tomb, handsome and well-fashioned, which
the four winds filled when they blew, each entering its own pipe. When the wind touched
the youths, the one kissed and embraced the other. By magic, they pronounced sweet
nothings. Thus spoke Floire to Blancheflor: “Kiss me, darling, lovingly.” And Blancheflor
answered with a kiss: “I love you more than any living thing.”

“Ingremane” (“magic”) is placed duplicitously here, for it follows a partial explanation of how this
mechanism works (it is powered by wind blowing through tubes). The machine is something like an
organ. The term for magic may refer only to the automata’s production of words, but it resonates
with the widespread attribution of these automata not only to engin (an ambivalent term if ever there
was, since it can refer to both creative intelligence and deceit) but to magic and even to demonic
powers (which we shall consider below). A good part of the technological detour, with all its
hesitations and experiments and false starts, all the negotiation between the craftsman and the materials, lies concealed beneath the reference to magic.

At the same time, though Blancheflor-the-automaton may speak the words of Blancheflor-the-woman, they do not mean the same thing. Of course, Blancheflor-the-automaton loves Floire-the-automaton more than any living thing. He is, like her, a creature of metal, not of flesh. Like her, he is not alive. And that irony, or duplicity, that dissembling within resemblance, could prove fatal to the man of flesh who must reprise the figures. The queen has imagined that an extravagant tomb could assuage her son’s grief and save his life, but she has not anticipated the way such objects can move those who encounter them. The exotic trees planted around the tomb attract flocks of birds whose song has the property of making lovers love each other the more ardently and throw themselves into each other’s arms, while nonlovers drift into slumber (631–46). Perhaps for this reason, Floire, visiting the tomb for the first time, declares his resolution to kill himself to rejoin his Blancheflor (781–92). Or perhaps the automaton’s words make Floire realize that he can only be united to his lover if he surrenders himself to the same mode of existence (nonexistence?), which he can do (he believes) only through death.

Paradoxically, these two funereal automata constitute instances of anthropogenesis, as do all technological and fictional beings. Human subjects do not generate works; we are not homo faber. Human subjects “emerge” from works; we are homo fabricatus (Inquiry 234/230). The technological detour slowly creates a technician, as Latour notes: “Imagination is never the source but rather the receptacle of beings of fiction,” which gain “the form of a human in a rebound effect” (250/246). It is the person observing the tomb who will take the two automata (which recognize each other as nothing human at all) as figures of his own human subjectivity.
On Love and Idols

The fictional characters Floire and Blancheflor do not love technological objects, which they take only as figurations of themselves, while the automata Floire and Blancheflor, as technological objects, love only each other and not humans. Thomas’s Tristan, for his part, is not Hoffmann. He does not love the statue of Iseut, which is only one among several inadequate doubles of the queen he desires. But love is in the air (so to speak) in both the romances and Latour’s work. The second page of his chapter on the beings of technology includes an enigmatic reference to “the mortal danger one risks by not loving them” (Inquiry 213/209). This comment would be incomprehensible were it not for Aramis, which asked what killed the project and answered: that its creators did not love Aramis enough (231/288). In the Inquiry, however, Latour does not expound upon love until his chapter on the religious mode in Part Three, where he invests love with the capacity “of saving characters by transforming them into persons” (305/303). If love transforms characters into persons, then would these automata, these technological/fictional figures become persons if we loved them? Latour does not raise this question, but our parallel reading of medieval romances, Aramis, and the Inquiry reveals its urgency.

As a conclusion to this essay, I would like to consider one, fleeting instance of such a transformation in Alexandre de Paris’s Roman d’Alexandre. This text foregrounds technological innovation in episodes featuring a diving bell and a chariot drawn by griffins, new passages that the author has invented and added to the existing source material in order to demonstrate the hero’s conquests of sea and sky (Branche 3, laisses 18–29 and 274–82). But precisely because these two passages call attention to artifice, they cannot represent the transformation of technology and fiction into persons. That occurs when technological being effaces itself, and for that we must turn to another of Alexandre de Paris’s new additions to the story: a strange forest populated by flower-girls, which Alexander and his army can only reach by tearing down two golden automata that guard
the bridge leading to the woods (Branche 3, laisses 194–97). The automata operate “par augure”
(“by magic”; 3400), and defend the passage with mallets so heavy that even Alexander cannot lift
them. It is not military prowess but an elaborate prayer ritual that brings them down; one is
devoured by a fish and the other borne away by a demon. Such is the destruction wrought by an
iconoclasm that would view all constructions as blasphemous.

The girls those automata guarded are perfectly lovely creatures who fulfill the soldiers’ every
desire:

Alixandres regarde desous une cepee
d’un vermel cherubin qui ot la fuelle lee
et iert a oisias d’or menüement ouvree.
Une pucele vit, bele et encoloree
ainsi come nature l’avoit enfaçonee.
Onques plus bele feme ne fu de mere née,
la char ot blanche et tenre como noif sor gelee;
la biauté de son vis durement li agree,
car la rougor estoit aveuc le blanc mellee. (Branche 3, 3482–90)

Alexandre peered under the shoots of a red carob tree with broad leaves, which was
delicately worked with golden birds. He saw a young woman, fair and rosy-cheeked, just as
nature had fashioned her. Never was a lovelier woman born of a mother. Her red cheeks and
snowy white skin pleased him greatly.

The very instauration that elicited the violent destruction of the guardians reappears in the language
with which “nature” is described; thus, the carob tree is “ouvree” with golden birds and the girl has
been “enfaçonee”—by nature, of course, but even so. “Never was such a beautiful woman born of a
mother,” the narrator states, conventionally enough, except that we are about to discover that this is
not a conventional superlative comment distinguishing one girl from others. It is a statement of fact.
Never was such a beautiful woman born of a mother, because this girl was not thus brought into the
world. The account of their life cycle is offered by the old men of the region when Alexander asks
how the girls live and maintain their youth, since the absence of tombs makes him believe they do
not age or die:

A l’entree d’yver encontre la froidure
entrent toutes en terre et muent lor faiture,
et qant estés revient et li biaus tans s’espure,
en guise de flors blanches viennent a lor droiture.
Celes qui dedens naissent s’ont des cors la figure
et la flors de dehors si est lor vesteüre,
et sont si bien taillées, chascune a sa mesure,
que ja n’i avra force ne cisel ne costure,
et chascuns vestemens tresq’a la terre dure.
Ainsi comme as puceles de cest bos vient a cure,
ja ne vaudront au main icel creature
q’eles n’aient au soir, ains que nuit soit oscure. (Branche 3, laisse 200, 3531–42)

At the beginning of winter, to guard against the cold, these women enter the earth and change their form. When summer returns and the weather brightens and grows fair, they return to their rightful form in the guise of white flowers. Within, they take the form of human bodies, and the petals on the outside are their garments, which are so well tailored to each woman’s measurements that there is no need of scissors or seams, and each garment falls all the way to the ground. Whatever they need or want, they have only to desire it in the morning and it will be theirs in the evening, before nightfall.

Peggy McCracken (72–75) has already proposed reading this passage in a way that unveils the artistic fashioning of the flower-girls, a fashioning or fabrication that the explanation of the girls’ organic birth and growth cycles would otherwise conceal. I note the reference to figures (3435) and the continued description of the girls in terms of artisanal work, such as sewing (3436–38), even though the comparison to craft is negated: “Ja n’i avra force ne cisel ne costure” (“There is no need of scissors or seams”). The girls’ immortality (perhaps that’s not the right word: they seem to be perennials) spares them the need for the kinds of funeral moments that so often receive elaborate descriptions of technology and fiction in medieval romance. The flower-girls are creatures whose very creation, ostensibly opposed in every way to that of the golden guardians, has left the traces of the technological and fictional modes. But the soldiers love them, and so they become persons.

Perhaps those of us who read medieval romances love them in a similar way, maintaining their shadowy figures in existence. Yet like the flower girls, the figures of our romances can never fully emerge from the shadows of the leaves that shelter them, as Alexandre learns to his chagrin when he expresses his desire to take a girl with him, only to be told she will die the moment she
leaves the forest. The technological and fictional modes may be modes of existence, but to love them and ask them to join in our emotional lives as fellow persons is to burden them with a weight they cannot bear. Even if we read these romances as documentation of technological projects and build these mechanisms, the objects that would result would never answer our love. Nor can the creations of fiction. In the final pages of Aramis, or the Love of Technology, Aramis only answers the author’s summons to speak because he never became a technological object, yet this ending is not a celebration of the triumph of fiction; it is a requiem. Thus, the project of situating medieval automata in the plural ontology of An Inquiry into the Modes of Existence has allowed them to emerge in their specificity, their difference from us, and their inaccessibility. Perhaps ultimately our love of automata is not the dream for technological mastery, but the wistful desire that may only be elicited by beings we can never possess.

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