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# Androids and Intelligent Networks: Artificial Slaves by Kevin LaGrandeur

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Kevin LaGrandeur. *Androids and Intelligent Networks in Early Modern Literature and Culture: Artificial Slaves*.

Routledge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 22. London: Routledge, 2013. xiv + 208 pp. \$125. ISBN: 978-0-415-63121-1.

In *Androids and Intelligent Networks in Early Modern Literature and Culture* Kevin LaGrandeur analyzes and historicizes the appearance of what he calls “artificial slaves” in sixteenth-century English drama. LaGrandeur’s main literary texts are the plays of Robert Greene (*The Honorable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* and *Alphonsus, King of Aragon*), Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*. The intelligent servants under inquiry, such as Friar Bacon’s oracular head in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, offer their masters and their makers the ability to foretell, and in some cases to influence, future events. LaGrandeur foregrounds the relationships between these magical informants and their creators, and suggests that these objects embody their makers’ hubristic designs to extend human knowledge beyond its ordained limits and concerns about the unchecked power of human artifice. He contextualizes the natural philosophers and their creations in the plays under discussion in early modern scientific culture, broadly construed, arguing that these figures embody prevailing concerns about new experimental science and the possibilities and pitfalls it fostered.

This ambitious volume begins with an examination of Aristotelian ideas about artificial servants and then moves to an examination of the creation of these objects in ancient Alexandria, the Dar al-Islam, and the Latin Christian West. Leaving aside the actual mechanical objects made by engineers over the centuries, LaGrandeur then examines the heady mix of alchemical treatises, Hermetic texts, and Cabalistic tracts that promised the secret to creating artificial life, whether in the form of a homunculus, an animated statue, or a golem, and argues that the Hermetic and Cabalistic traditions informed the ideas of prominent early modern alchemists such as Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus. The next several chapters are detailed analyses of the plays from which LaGrandeur has drawn his examples. Finally, the book closes with an examination of the narrative parallels between “our post-industrial, posthuman, and digital culture, and Shakespeare’s early modern, pre-industrial, pre-empirical one, both of which struggled with rapid scientific change” (15).

LaGrandeur has largely mastered a historical narrative about the appearance and idea of the artificial servant that spans two millennia. Yet some of the scholarship in the history of medieval and early modern science on which he has relied is out of date. More-recent scholarship over the past two decades has complicated and enriched existing narratives about, for example, twelfth-century Aristotelian ideas about generation, Elizabethan alchemy, and early modern experimental science. Therefore, the historical narrative that LaGrandeur traces is, at times, rather broadly sketched. The chapters on Greene, Shakespeare, and Marlowe are thoughtful case studies on the role of the intelligent artificial servant in Elizabethan literature. They convincingly demonstrate how these plays dramatize contemporary concerns about the possibility that human actors might be displaced, or even destroyed, by their scientific creations. Indeed, LaGrandeur sees this same anxiety reflected in modern representations of the same kind of object, and argues that Elizabethan drama resonates with our current debates about advanced, intelligent technology. *Androids and Intelligent Networks* complements recent scholarship on automata in early modern literature, and will be of interest to scholars working on that topic, as well as the history of early modern science and art history.

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