Giorgina S. Paiella
University Scholar Proposal

**Woman a Machine:**
The History and Gendered Semiotics of Female Automata

“Olympia appeared dressed with great richness and taste. Her beautifully shaped face and her figure roused general admiration. The somewhat strange arch of her back and the wasp-like thinness of her waist seemed to be produced by too tight lacing... Ah! Then he saw with what a longing glance she gazed towards him, and how every note of her song plainly sprang from that loving glance, whose fire penetrated his inmost soul...He could restrain himself no longer, but with mingled pain and rapture shouted out, ‘Olympia!’”


“I am alone and miserable: man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species and have the same defects. This being you must create.”

-Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

**Field of Interest, Statement of Problem, and Deliverables**

Automata have captured the literary and scientific imagination for centuries. From the Greek word *automaton,*¹ meaning, “acting of one’s own will,” automata are self-operating machines with a long history dating back to ancient times, where they were used for entertainment, demonstration of scientific principles, and imitation of the actions and behavior of sentient objects. Although automata have been created in the form of animals, mythical beings, instruments, and humans of both genders, the female automaton is perhaps the most persistently reimagined of these entities, having been reshaped throughout the ages to encompass iterations of the cyborg, android, and robot. Female automata are also the subjects of countless literary works, films, and other cultural artifacts, including Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” the supposed

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animatronic housewives in Ira Levin’s *The Stepford Wives*, Rachael from *Blade Runner*, and Samantha from *Her*.

For my proposed University Scholar project, I plan to produce three compiled book chapters titled *Woman a Machine: The History and Gendered Semiotics of Female Automata*, where I will examine the history of the female automaton and its replication and reimagination throughout time. Situating female automata in their historical contexts provides insights into the sociocultural factors at work in various eras, including the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and the mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth century “Golden Age of Automata” (Bailly). I also plan to examine how these automata function in a variety of literary works, arguing that these gendered, created machines are the most relevant and persistent metaphors we have for exploring the frameworks of gender and gender performativity. Female automata are essential case studies that reveal how men—and by extension patriarchal society—act out their issues with embodied human females by engaging with key debates on the relationship between man and machine, creator and created, and animator and animated, especially because automata and texts that explore them are disproportionately created by men. Furthermore, as gender theorist Judith Butler has detailed in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* and other scholarly essays, gender is an act that is a “doing” rather than a “being,” “a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (Butler 21). Butler’s theories of gender performativity apply to the gendered behaviors, actions, and meanings that we ascribe to female automata and highlight the largely unexamined similarities between embodied humans and these entities. The book chapters that I plan to produce mapping gender frameworks to female automata would be

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2 Based on Philip K. Dick’s 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*
a unique contribution to my fields of study because there is no existing work that comprehensively examines female automata in a variety of historical contexts and literary works.

The interdisciplinary research areas that I plan to study are increasingly important as technology continues to shape and alter genders, sexualities, and identities. As the University of Connecticut and other institutions increasingly direct their attention to the digital humanities, it is essential to keep gender at the forefront of this conversation because the technology and cybernetics disciplines remain both male and science dominated. As an English major with a double minor in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies and philosophy, I concur with Katherine Hayles, who states in her influential How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics:

Culture circulates through science no less than science circulates through culture. The heart that keeps this circulatory system flowing is narrative—narratives about culture, narratives within culture, narratives about science, narratives within science... The literary texts often reveal, as scientific work cannot, the complex cultural, social, and representational issues tied up with conceptual shifts and technological innovations. (Hayles 21-24)

My proposed project would allow me to go beyond the average plan of study for my majors and minors and produce a work that reflects upon how I have academically specialized throughout my time here at UConn. This project is in many ways an outgrowth of the more than two-year critical conversation that first developed in Professor Dwight Codr’s Introduction to Literary Studies course that I took in my first semester, which introduced me to several texts and critical conversations that continue to frame my theoretical methods. I also wrote a paper titled, “‘The Happy Housewife Heroine’: Second-Wave Feminism, Ira Levin’s The Stepford Wives, and Feminist Criticism of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein,” which situated late-twentieth century literary
criticism on *Frankenstein* in the political context of second wave feminism. It is my goal to pursue a doctorate in English with a concentration in feminist theory, so a rigorous curriculum and a thesis that exceeds the expectations of an undergraduate honors thesis would be an incomparable experience that enhances my educational opportunities.

**Review of Literature**

I spent this past summer working on a self-designed literary research project made possible by a Summer Undergraduate Research Fund (SURF) named award. I conducted research and wrote a literary research paper titled “The Woman Who is Not One: Incorporeal Femininity, Disembodied Cinematic Representation, and the Uneven Movement Toward the Cyborg Identity,” where I situated Spike Jonze’s 2013 film *Her* within the context of debates and theoretical explorations central to philosophy, gender studies, science fiction narratives, and film theory. This experience allowed me to read widely and critically within the relevant literature, producing comprehensive notes and citations from films, novels, journal articles, short stories, anthologies, and other forms of literary criticism.

The scholarly literature relevant to my proposed project can be grouped into three (albeit overlapping) categories that align with the three main areas of inquiry that I outline in my methods section. The first group of texts are works that detail prominent examples of female automata crafted throughout history and their male counterparts. The books, collections, and exhibitions of expert automata collector and restorer Christian Bailly and other sources that detail the automata of Al-Jazari, Wolfgang von Kempelen, Henri Maillardet, and Blaise Bontems are especially valuable. The second group of texts includes cultural artifacts that represent different iterations of the female automaton,
including E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman,” Ira Levin’s The Stepford Wives, and science fiction works like Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner and Spike Jonze’s Her. The myth of Pygmalion and Galatea is also essential to my analysis, in addition to its many reinterpretations. Similarly, I will explore texts like Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and the work of second-wave feminist critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who extended gender issues to artificial beings. The final group of texts includes seminal works in gender studies and the related fields of philosophy, sociology, and psychology that will assist in my application of gender frameworks to automata. Julien Offray de la Mettrie’s Man a Machine is a critical historical philosophical text that will frame this section, as it extends Descartes’ arguments that animals are mere automata to humans. Key works by Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, Sut Jhally, and Susan Bordo provide insights into self-presentation, gender performativity, and gendered body studies. Furthermore, I will apply work from theorists like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Lacan, whose work examines marginalized identities but has not been comprehensively applied to non-human entities. I will also examine the work of Katherine Hayles and seminal cyberfeminist Donna Haraway.

Methods

The theoretical framework of my project is threefold, with each of the three sections corresponding to a book chapter. First, I plan to provide an analysis of prominent examples of female automata throughout history by conducting research in worldwide, online scholarly archives and databases to research prominent examples of automata from antiquity to the modern era, arguing that technological incarnations are not separate from

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3 La Mettrie states, “Let us then conclude boldly that man is a machine, and that in the whole universe there is but a single substance differently modified” (La Mettrie 148).
earlier automata but theoretically and historically linked as various self-acting machines. Secondly, I plan to explore narratives, films, and other sources that represent the female automaton and evaluate the treatment and agency of such beings in these works. Lastly, I plan to map various gender theories to technological bodies, bridging these seemingly dissimilar disciplines and revealing why automata are valuable contributors to gender issues and how gender and technology are inseparable concepts on the most basic levels of language, concepts, and semiotics (meaning-making). For example, two satirical works that I will examine, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man that was Used Up” and Jonathan Swift’s “The Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed,” feature two created beings that are conceptualized almost exclusively in relation to their respective genders.4

I have carefully planned three semesters of symbiotic courses detailed in my plan of study that will assist in the completion of my project. In Spring 2015, I plan to take upper-division coursework in English, gender studies, and philosophy, including my English capstone course. I will also complete a writing internship at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center archives, researching collections that are compatible with my project objectives and starting to write my book chapters. In Summer 2015, I will supplement my project with trips to automata museums, including the Morris Museum in Morristown, New Jersey, which features the Guinness Collection of Instruments and Automata, a collection of over 150 automata from around the world, many dating to the nineteenth century “Golden Age of Automata.” I will also continue to compile my research into my

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4 In the former, a war veteran with stunning physical features assembles himself from body parts each day. In the latter, a beautiful young nymph disassembles each night before bed. This reveals something poignant about disproportionate female and male representations. I plan to utilize this dualism as a conceptual framework for female “disassembly” and male “assembly.”
book chapters. In Fall 2015, I will take a graduate level digitality course and complete a writing internship at the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry on the UConn campus. The Puppeteers of America Audio-Visual Collection and Kay Janney Library and Archives are valuable resources that will enhance the scope of my historical automata analysis. I hope to curate an exhibit of resources relating to puppetry and female automata from my multi-semester internships. In Spring 2016, I will complete the writing and editing phase of my project while enrolled in my honors thesis course.

References


Addendum for additional “Significant works in the Field” required for projects in the humanities.

**Significant Work in the Field**


Plan of Study

I have already completed all of my general education requirements and require no academic substitutions for the completion of my major and minors. I have crafted a plan of study that is based on highly interdisciplinary upper-division and graduate-level course offerings and incorporates courses taught by faculty with expertise in the digital humanities, including Professors Alenda Chang and Yohei Igarashi. This plan of study exceeds the requirements for my English major and philosophy and women’s, gender, and sexuality studies minors, allows for greater academic specialization and opportunities for honors coursework, and contributes directly to enhanced knowledge and expertise for the execution of my project.

I selected a special topics WGSS course in Feminism and Science Fiction because female automata are prominent subjects in thought experiments and science fiction narratives. I have also selected a variety of philosophy courses that address the theoretical, ethical, and metaphysical issues central to my analysis of gender, selfhood, and mechanization, including Bioethics and Metaphysics and Epistemology. I would take my English capstone course in Digital Rhetoric during the second semester of my junior year rather than my senior year to accelerate the progress of my project. I have selected Victorian English Literature because this age encompassed the “Golden Age of Automata,” and Feminist Disability Studies because the construction of bodies maps to other marginalized identities. The Seminar in American Studies course relates to questions of empathy in relation to artificial, sentient beings. I plan to complete two writing internships in the spring semester of my junior year and fall semester of my senior year to benefit from ample university archives, museums, and collections, and I hope to curate an exhibit of resources relating to puppetry and female automata.