

Early Warnings: Renaissance Proto-robots and Social Dangers

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My presentation will show how Renaissance stories of the golem of Prague, of Paracelsus's homunculus, and of a talking brass head built by a natural philosopher in Robert Greene's play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* show the fears and hopes embedded in that culture's reactions to human invention—as well as an ambivalence to the idea of slavery, for intelligent objects are almost uniformly proxies for indentured servants. Renaissance tales of the golem spring from Eastern Europe, especially Prague, and depict the creation of an artificial humanoid to help protect the Jewish citizenry from harm. The golem is chiefly a product of Cabalistic magic, which is precisely this sort of secretive and formulaic magic that contemporaneously underpins claims by scientists of the period, such as Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa, to have made tiny humans (homunculi) in flasks. The written claims of these scientists affect and reflect fiction of the period, such as Greene's play about Bacon, whose transgressive experimentation with a talking, metal humanoid head depicts the dangers of new ideas. These tales carry important warnings for the future—our time. For the tales examined in this presentation about artificial servants that predate the modern era signal ambivalence about our innate technological abilities—an ambivalence that anticipates today's concerns about AI. These artificial servants' promises of vastly increased power over our own natural limits are countervailed by fears about being overwhelmed by our own ingenuity.