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Fictions of life and death: Tomb automata in medieval romance

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Abstract While automata appear in medieval European textual sources in many different settings, they frequently cluster around tombs, memorials and other places associated with the dead. In several different literary examples, automata expose the unstable definitions of 'life' and 'death' and reveal contemporary ideas about the complexity and permeability of these categories.

Automata pervade medieval culture. Mechanical birds in palaces from Karakorum to Baghdad flapped their wings and chirped; mechanized fountains from Damascus to Paris played music and sprayed water or wine at timed intervals. The ascending Throne of Solomon in Constantinople, guarded by roaring bronze lions, manifested the majesty of the Roman *basileus*, just as automated wine-servants and elaborate clepsydrae demonstrated the material and intellectual resources available to caliphs and emirs. In European texts, artificial, self-moving figures defended bridges and castles, played music and performed tricks and foretold the future. Automata recur in different media, in different roles and in different places. Although automata were not built in Europe until the turn of the fourteenth century, they are – in textual form – as much a part of medieval European culture as the obscene or impious miniatures found in the margins of manuscript books. Just as those images illustrated the margins of society and behavior (whether to subvert norms or reinforce them I leave to others to debate), so also automata exposed the boundaries of different

categories. In some instances, these boundaries and the roles that the automata play are fairly clearcut: For example, in the First Continuation of Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval* (c. 1200), two automata guard the tent of Alardin, an 'eastern' ruler and allow only virgin maidens and noble youths to enter the tent, thereby constraining class and morality at the same time (*PG*, 3.149).[1] At other times, however, the categories are permeable and unstable, such as with the categories of 'life' and 'death'.

In the presence of automata, these categories are complicated by a third category, that of 'neither living nor dead'. In a cluster of texts from the mid-twelfth to the early-thirteenth centuries, automata embody the ambiguous boundaries separating life and death, even as they signal their own problematic status as active – and often perceptive (as with the automata guarding Alardin's tent) – but neither alive nor dead. This is particularly evident in those instances in which automata appear in tombs, or in settings meant to evoke them. In some instances, automata watch over fallen heroes, preserved and lifelike for eternity. Incorruptible guardians of the still and silent, they move only when in the presence of another person in the tomb. In the *Roman d'Eneas* (c. 1160), Camille rests in her tomb, embalmed and restored to how she appeared in life, surrounded by magical objects. A carbuncle illuminates the chamber and an automaton – an archer – stands sentry, ready to shoot an arrow at the carbuncle and extinguish it if the tomb is disturbed. 'At a breath all is lost', the narrator states – just the slightest hint of air moving in the tomb is enough to disturb the archer and extinguish the light (*RE* 1.287). The carbuncle, signifying life and the persistence of the human spirit, lights the chthonic tomb and can only be extinguished – by the moving statue – when the living interferes with the dead. The archer-automaton safeguards Camille's in-betweenness – embalmed, entombed, eternally uncorrupted, watched over by a lifelike, animated statue and illuminated by a light symbolizing the human spirit. But the instant that life (synecdochically referred to as 'breath') materializes in the tomb, Camille's liminal status becomes insupportable.

The automaton in Camille's tomb emphasizes the paradox of a dead body that does not appear dead, but in some cases moving statues are copies of living individuals who are believed to be dead. Take, for example, the moving, speaking, breathing statues of the two eponymous lovers in *Le Conte de Floire et Blancheflor* (c. 1150–1170). Floire, a Saracen princeling, falls in love with Blancheflor, a Christian prisoner. Floire's father, king of Al-Andalus, then decides that Blancheflor is unsuitable for his son – due to her religion and social status – and vows to kill her. Ultimately unable to cause her death, King Fenix instead sells her to the emir of Babylon, telling his son that Blancheflor has died. In order to assuage his son's grief and to give weight to the fiction of Blancheflor's death, the king has built a marvelous mausoleum for Blancheflor. Erected by enchantment and art, and lavishly decorated with paintings and precious gems, the centerpieces are two marble statues of the young lovers. The

narrator emphasizes the eerie likeness of the pair to their flesh-and-blood counterparts, saying that no one could have improved on it. Furthermore, the statues move and speak, caressing and kissing one another when a breath of air moves inside the tomb: 'They would speak by magic and touch each other's face. Floire said to Blancheflor, "Kiss me, my beautiful, my love." Blancheflor said, while kissing, "I love you more than any living thing"' (*CFB* 34).

These automata are exact copies of two living individuals, one of who was believed to be dead. Their behavior highlights their life-likeness: By kissing and touching each other, they mimic the real Floire and Blancheflor, enacting a particularly human activity. A memorial to the love between the supposedly dead Blancheflor and the still-living Floire, the tomb is an extremely realistic artificial representation of the two lovers and their undying love. The image of Blancheflor, kissing her beloved, is meant to be a comfort to him as he watches the statues perform. Furthermore, the figures move and speak like living beings, and refer to themselves self-consciously as alive. At the same time, the automaton-Blancheflor's dialog ironically highlights the fact that neither automaton is alive; rather, they are both copies of living individuals. However, in a further layer of irony, at this moment in the narrative the audience and Floire's father know that Blancheflor is still alive, but Floire himself is ignorant of this. Thus, to the audience, the statues are obviously copies: As neither Floire nor Blancheflor is actually dead, the automata are clearly not the preserved, moving bodies of the two lovers. And, in contrast to the archer in Camille's tomb, these automata come alive in the presence of the living – when air circulates in the tomb. In this case, the false tomb promotes the fiction of Blancheflor's death, with moving, speaking three-dimensional likenesses of the lovers who perform as the living lovers. Yet, at the same time, the automaton of Blancheflor in the tomb is supposed to recall to the bereaved Floire his dead lover while she lived. Furthermore, the rituals the automata perform suggest that although Blancheflor is (supposedly) dead, their love abides. Here, the animated statues of Floire and Blancheflor, placed at a tomb, fulfill paradoxical functions. They memorialize the love affair between the two protagonists. Placed in an underground tomb, the lifelike, animated statues recall the dead as they were when alive, illustrating a fiction of life, even as the tomb, of a person who is not actually dead, offers the fiction of death.

In the Hall of Statues in Thomas of Britain's Anglo-Norman *Tristran* (c. 1160–80), automata also perform in the service of the illusion of continued life.[2] After conquering a wealthy giant, Tristran commands him to finance an elaborate scheme to erect a monument to his beloved, Queen Ysolt. Paid for by the giant, Tristran hires artisans and goldsmiths from distant lands to create lifelike statues of Ysolt and her entourage. The image of Ysolt holds a scepter in one hand, with a bird perched upon it that beat its wings as if it were living. In the other hand the statue carries a ring inscribed with the words Ysolt had spoken at their parting. The statue is 'so artistic in regard to face and form that

2 Thomas's tale only exists in 10 fragments, two of which are now lost. The episode with the statues exists in the (now lost) Turin fragment. See

no one who looked at it could think otherwise than there was life in all its limbs' (*STI* 120). In place of Ysolt's heart is a coffer filled with herbs and gold, connected to tubes to her mouth, so that she exhales scented air. In *Floire et Blancheflor* the 'breath of air' was the mechanism that made the automata come to life; while in this instance the breath emanates from within Ysolt's heart and is crucial to maintaining life-likeness. The narrator remarks, 'In regard to shape, beauty, and size this figure was so much like Queen Ysolt as though she herself were standing there, and lifelike as though it were actually alive' (*STI* 121). The physiology of the statue echoes contemporary physiology, which placed the heart at the center of respiration and insisted on the importance of *spiritus*, or breath, for life. At her feet is a statue of the dwarf who had denounced her to Mark, and beside her is a replica of Petitcru, her dog, who would shake his head and jingle his collar. These automata are guarded by a statue of the giant on one side of the entrance to the cave, and on the other side, a lion cast in copper that lashed its tail. Tristran placed these statues in a private vault, and visited them often. Unable to see Ysolt, and mad from the effects of the love potion, Tristran constructed a private diorama with moving statues that allowed him to re-live his affair with Ysolt. In the privacy of the vault, Tristran continues his relationship, kissing, holding and talking to the image of Ysolt.

Within the text, the perfect life-likeness of the automata is highlighted alongside the artifice. The moving statues are a memorial to the doomed love affair between Ysolt and Tristran, and permit Tristran to pretend that their affair – like his love for her – lives on. Tristran holds the statue and speaks to it 'as if she were alive' (*STI* 123), but, in fact, Ysolt is not dead. The statue is a simulacrum of Ysolt – its breathing, lifelike appearance so full of subtlety that it would fool anyone who saw it – but, for Tristran, the artificial copy replaces the human individual. Yet, at the same time, Tristran and the audience both know that the statue of Ysolt is an elaborate ruse – Ysolt is merely separated from Tristran, not dead.

In all three instances, automata juxtapose definitions of life and death. In *Eneas*, the archer in the tomb emphasizes Camille's liminal status as no longer alive, but incorruptible, and therefore not completely dead. The automata in *Floire and Blancheflor* and *Tristran* are lifelike memorials to absent lovers. The statues of Floire, Blancheflor and Ysolt are so lifelike – they move, speak and breathe – that they complicate the distinctions and definitions surrounding the concept of 'life'. They are not 'alive' in the same way that the 'real' Ysolt, Floire and Blancheflor are alive, but they are not 'dead', either. These inorganic, artificial, magical objects confound the simplistic binary of 'life' and 'death' by obscuring the boundaries between them, and by embodying a third category. That all three examples appear in tombs and memorials – places specifically associated with death – is no accident. Automata intervene between life and death, and reveal that definitions of life in this period were complex, contingent and context-dependent.

Abbreviations

CFB Leclanche, J.L., ed. 1983. *Le Conte de Floire et Blancheflor*. Paris: Honoré Champion

PG Potvin, C., ed. 1977 [1866–71]. *Perceval le Gallois*. 6 vols. in 3. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints.

RE Salverda de Grave, J.J., ed. 1964. *Le Roman d'Eneas*. 2 vols. Paris: Honoré Champion.

STI Schach, P., ed. and trans. 1973. *The Saga of Tristram and Ísönd*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

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