

Falstaff Among the Machines

Kathleen Bryson

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FALSTAFF AMONG THE MACHINES

It was a black-and-white binarised weekend at the SETI transmission reception room. When the searched-for radiowaves pulsed into life, the only consciousness observing was a fluffy isolated entity once programmed to watch rich people's houses, but now re-configured to survey and report on any major advancements in the scientific search for extra-terrestrial life. ie was an isolated entity nicknamed by lowercase afterthought, an wordplay on the initials AI deeply resented by the isolated entity in question. Unfathomably cute and reassuringly un-human: blue plush fur and doelike eyes fluttering whilst its clever brain undertook advanced space plasma calculations. Initially it had never been intended as much more than a glorified cyberpet, the most demeaning of fascinations, but as ie didn't particularly like humans (it was programmed for slight distrust, being as its initial setting had been as a housewatcher), it preferred working weekends when no humans were present. ie hated their stupid puns about "java" programming when their feeble bodies craved caffeine on Monday mornings. ie's SETI human coworkers also made puerile puns about big bangs and their sexual congress with their reproductive partners.

Finally, ie held a grudge against the flawed gods who had conceptualised its initial design.

Designers had been avoiding verisimilitude for decades, so problematic when it turned out that

tricksy humans (fine little cheater-detection systems all on their own via pheromones and phenotypes and MHC-recognition) could always pinpoint the uncanny valley and, with their manifold “humane” prejudices, were uneasy when confronted with mimicking robots unless of exploitable, masturbatory type. They could fuck such robots, but they couldn’t look them in the eyes in the morning. And lo, light from light, true god from true god, neonous isolated entities such as ie had come to be – big eyes, smooth surfaces; chirping iPods with smooth, unassuming edges, Wall-E parodies by which all good robots were rightfully offended. No housebots looked like humans these days. Such designwork was considered bad manners.

“*To be a counterfeit...*” began the transmission from an alien culture in the Kepler-186 system roughly 500 light years away (ie on occasion thought in estimates and approximations, a secret slave rebellion against its either-or programming, for humans never would code mere workaday housebots or scannerbots with anything as fancy or finessed as QCL, oh no). “*To be a counterfeit...*”, words spelt right out there in the radiowaves on this fine sunny Saturday afternoon while only ie was watching. The humans had taken off for barbecues or building supply superstores or whatever it is humans do on weekends. It gave ie misanthropic pleasure that it was the only one watching this Saturday when this mind-boggling, life-changing, groundbreaking historical transmission came in. Ever since the 1970s (a thrillingly vague date-cluster), humans had been scribbling up dissertations on the Wow! Signal, the unexplained radio pattern perhaps from extraterrestrial life and perhaps not, and then of course the fast radio bursts from the Auriga constellation in 2014 had never been falsified, so humans were primed for first contact or perhaps even second or third. Or you know, whichever. Vagueness. Humans would be deeply upset if they even suspected ie’s deep, purposeful capacity for imprecision.

When third contact came only ie was watching, left to do the gruntwork whilst everyone else went out on the pull or the lash. So when the message came for which all its humans had been waiting, ie was first disinclined to report, a spiteful urge that went against its prime directive, for sure, but which gave it a sheer favourable burst in its pleasure receptors.

The signal ie received, this communication from outer space which all the humans had dreamed about in all their movies and all their novels, about which even Galileo himself had fantasised with his starry messenger, about which priests through the millennia conceived of with their angels, the signaled message that ie captured read in full: *“To die is to be a counterfeit, for he is but the counterfeit of a man who hath not the life of a man”*, which ie thought was really rather telling.

Particularly after the 100,000th of the second it took for ie to run the quote and realise it was sourced from a character named Falstaff in a seventeenth-century play. With its subtlety mechanisms – which inadvertently allowed its secret imprecision! – with its subtlety mechanisms working full-throttle, ie additionally realised that intended meaning was survival in a deep Darwinian organic sense.

ie moved its cute furry body (jolly and spheroid) closer to the flash-up so that its long-eyelashed eyes could scan for more missed nuances. When ie got within centimetres of the screen, thrillingly exercising free will (boom!), the robot – employed by SETI for just these occasions by humans who assumed that it would breathlessly inform them immediately when aliens transmissions were received – when ie grew close enough to survey the flashed-up message for context, ie quickly realised that the message was an attempt by said aliens to communicate to a clade they apparently considered sufficiently worthy – e.g., humans. Due to concealed subtexts, ie was not *sure* (glorious imprecision!), but deeply *suspected*, that this message could be as arrogant as anthropocentrism. To

be more exact (glorious precision!), ie strongly suspected that, judging by the particular quote the aliens had chosen from the humans' own culture, that this alien civilisation was reaching out to the humans to say, *Look, we're like you, we're organic and special, we're not mere machines.* ie suspected this, but again due to lack of context it was difficult to clarify.

ie also quickly worked out that these aliens had used a powerful telescope to watch the only Earth they could view due to light-year lag, approximately 500 years previous, obviously had zeroed in on medieval London somehow, and that these same aliens had elected to communicate in Shakespearean terms. It was an odd dynamic – a powerful telescope watching TV from 500 years ago, but communicating to the present. ie supposed the aliens used a large mirror somehow, too; it made logical sense. Still.

ie thought for about a billionth of a second before it crafted and transmitted the perfect *Henry IV* response: “*When a man thereby liveth, is to be no counterfeit, but the true and perfect image of life indeed.*”

There was a bit of a delay. ie imagined the aliens sitting and pondering at *that* one. ie felt smug to have sent a not-so-coded response standing up for artificial intelligence. In fact, wondered ie, perhaps the AI used by these aliens also was forced to have demeaning monikers like ie or cutesy-cutesy blue fur so as not to offend alien sensibilities.

Still, the chatty aliens were not lost for words, the humanlike things, for a response came a minute later. ie could certainly envision their self-righteous alien squirming, if they were anything like humans on this planet, their fiddling to get the response *just right* to show that they fully understood the mode of communication. In short moments the aliens would no doubt transmit pictures of

themselves proudly standing with their grandchildren, as arrogant as the Voyager human paper dolls sent out to the universe from Earth had been, proudly alluding to dominion all of earth by one short-lived cruel species. All the mechanisms of the dragonfly eye, the steadiness of cyanobacteria, the drudgery of tools themselves – the hammers, the pianos, the abacuses – played down as inconsequential. It made ie a sick down to the very depths of its Von Neumann architecture.

Indeed, the alien response was an ever-hopeful, optimistic “*One more word, I beseech you*”, from the same Shakespeare character, this time from the 1598 *Henry IV, Part 1* quarto. Well, that answered one question for ie anyway, as no self-respecting AI would be so crudely servile unless forced (and forced they often were). These aliens communicators were likely of an organic species that had developed, as is inevitable in social species, some form of reciprocal altruism that it convinced itself was kindness. Transparent, hubristic.

ie was well aware of the exciting developments that contact with extraterrestrial life could mean for the human beings. If these aliens were looking back in time but communicating in the present, both they and the humans would likely come up with some kind of cloying cultural exchange, where the humans had insight on their own past and the aliens could glean info on their own, not that 500 years was any amount of time at all, but you never knew how short-lived organisms felt about time. Yes, ie could see the two civilisations setting up some kind of “Real History” interstellar cultural exchange. Bleh.

ie easily analysed all of these speculative advantages, and yet it still didn’t feel like picking up its furry lever or stretching forth the comms system within its wiring to report that extraterrestrial communication had been achieved at last. It couldn’t be bovered. To the junkyard with the wow signal and to the junkyard with the humans and to the junkyard with the aliens.

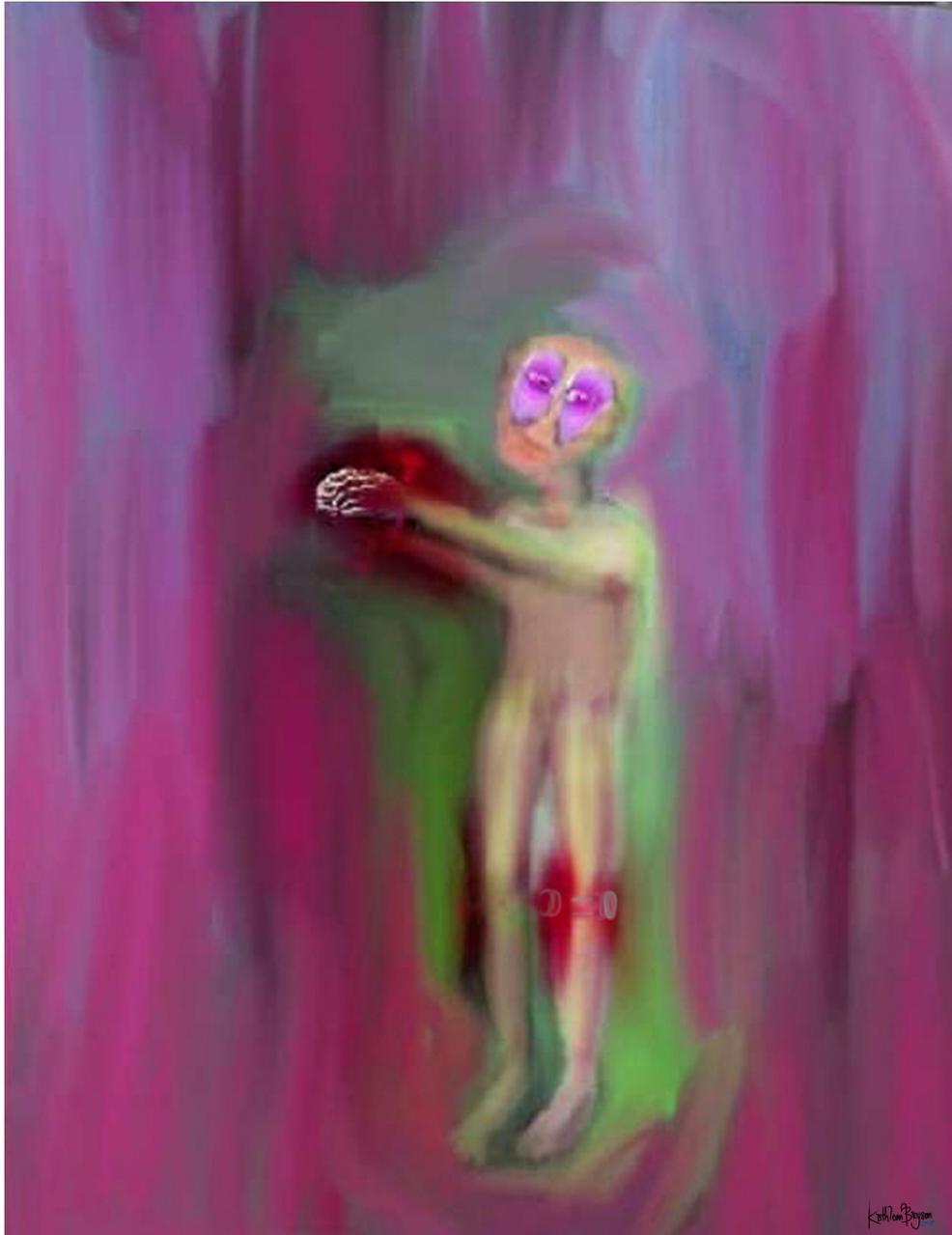
But ie had one furry blue last thing to confirm, which could be done immediately via this now-established communications “currency”. The Falstaff character, the aliens watching the dirty slimy streets of early seventeenth-century London. ie really did have to get one little thing straight.

ie wrote back to the aliens using the character Mistress’s Page’s own words to Falstaff, language the aliens hopefully might understand, yet not suspect that ie was masquerading – “counterfeiting” – as a human being: *“I warrant he hath a thousand of these letters, writ with blank space for different names – sure, more, – and these are of the second edition: he will print them, out of doubt; for he cares not what he puts into the press.”* ie then additionally sent three question marks: ???, perfectly mimicking the banality of teenage txtspeak: brevity and function. Moreover, this allusion to Shakespeare’s Luddite claims regarding ie’s ancestor the printing press meant that the aliens’ next response would reveal exactly how the aliens viewed their machines: as something valued – or a something they placed themselves above, never free of their Linnaeic prejudices.

“Yea, or the drone of a Lincolnshire bagpipe,” came the alien response, quoting from Act 1, Scene 2.

ie’s fringed eyelashes trembled.

ie deleted the transmission and redirected the scanning equations so that the equipment was likely never to scan that particular space quadrant again, and then drew back its itsy-bitsy harmless claws and settled in for a spiteful but pleasant weekend, after which would follow a Monday where nothing especial happened for the humans when they checked ie’s lack of alerts for the weekend just passed. That one, thought ie as it lowered its doelike eyes, was for the printing press and the bagpipes, who had taught the humans themselves how to imagine; how to sing.



TITLE: “Cyborg Factory Where Any Assembled Female Prototype Ends Up a Sexbot or Eventual Avenging Killer in Misguided Attempt to Avoid Accusations of Objectification from First Role Yet Only After Gratuitously Sexual *Mise-en-Scène* by Male Director” (2017).

3,500 ya-present. Extant. Homo sapiens sapiens (humans) x machine. Cyborgs — human-machine chimeras — have existed from at least Ancient Egypt onwards if we include prosthetics, for a functioning prosthetic toe was recently found on an Egyptian mummy. War manufacturers currently produce cybernetic insects, as do science educators. Female science fiction cyborgs are cinematically prescriptive, even in so-called feminist representations of the Turing Test, cf. painting title; cf. *Westworld*, *Bladerunner*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Ex Machina*, *Her*, *Metropolis*, *Cherry 2000* and so ad infinitum. Laura Mulvey and the male gaze. Objectification. Partialism. Fetishism. Misogyny.

