Female Robots in Flux: A Diachronic Exploration of Gender, Power, and Feminism

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Artists and writers from all cultures and eras have displayed a fascination with the theme of “creating women.” Indeed, this fascination has manifested as the golden maidens crafted by Hephaestus, Pygmalion’s marble statue from Greek mythology, the ghostly beauties of Chinese folklore, and, more recently, love dolls, robotic companions, and female AIs. These “manufactured women” are often shaped by male desire. Like their predecessors from antiquity and folklore, the female robots of the mechanical and digital age are also frequently shaped by male desire and portrayed as alluring beauties, virtuous saints, or dangerous femme fatales—figures that resonate with the representations of femininity that have been explored in film and media theory. In her seminal work on the male gaze, Laura Mulvey argues that in classical cinema, women are often positioned as passive objects of male visual pleasure (62). Kelly Oliver (453–455) extends this observation to contemporary media, pointing out that the male gaze not only reduces women to objects of sexual desire but also exerts control over their bodies. Andreas Huyssen (230) also contributes to the discussion of the male gaze by noting how technology itself is often gendered as female in male-dominated narratives, further demonstrating how technological advancement often triggers fears of female autonomy. In his analysis of *Metropolis* (1927), Huyssen uses the image of the female robot named Maria to illustrate how technology—often perceived as both alluring and threatening—is gendered female (230). Maria, as a robot, encapsulates men’s dual fear of women and technology. This dual fear, which is central to many female robot narratives, is composed of both a desire for control and a feeling of anxiety over losing control (Huyssen 227).

These recurring fantasies rooted in control and fear have influenced the formation of a typical narrative structure in female robot narratives. As Minsoo Kang summarizes, stories about female robots often employ clichéd motifs, such as the Madonna/Whore dichotomy, the juxtaposition of objects of desire and objects of fear, and stories that combine the impulse to control female bodies with the anxiety that arises from the potential loss of that control (5). These motifs, which are constantly evolving, continue to shape contemporary science fiction literature and films. Whether represented as alluring beauties, virtuous saints, or dangerous femme fatales, these female robots are denied agency and are instead subordinated to the male gaze. Consequently, it is challenging to identify an “authentic” female perspective within science fiction narratives. How, then, can these narratives of female robots be reevaluated? Can they be interpreted as a series of stories about the gender dynamics between men and women?

To answer these questions, this study traces the changes in these robot stories rather than focusing on a single story and its female characters. This reframing highlights the potential for rethinking stories of female robots within their social-historical contexts in order to identify both oppressive structures and potential moments of resistance and transformation. First, female robot narratives are often perceived as repetitive stories of male control and the fear of losing control. As a consequence of this focus, there is also a lack of robust analysis of these misogynistic female robot narratives within the context of the historical development of feminism. A diachronic approach may allow for research to overcome the limitations imposed by the male gaze and underlying misogyny. Such limitations often overshadow potential expressions of female agency and resistance, reinforcing traditional power dynamics.

Second, while Julie Wosk, in her book *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves*, insightfully analyzes different female robots from a historical perspective and traces two parallel narratives—men trying to use technology to create the "ideal woman" and women using the same tools to shape autonomous identities (8). She does not connect the female robots to the four waves of Western feminism. If we consider these dynamic changes within the context of Western feminist movements, it becomes clear that these two narratives are interwoven. Narratives about female robots continually rewritten in fiction and film are shaped both by men and women. Behind the changes in female robots lies the persistent struggle of women in society, who have fought for their civil rights and worked to change their circumstances over the centuries. Even if it is difficult to identify women's own voices in female robot stories that are dominated by the male gaze, a diachronic perspective can reveal that these representations of female robots—and, by extension, women—are deeply influenced by the conditions faced by actual women in society.

Therefore, this paper begins by introducing a diachronic approach to emphasize how narratives about female robots shift over time. Following this approach, the study reinterprets the recurring themes of female robots in science fiction literature and film within their specific social and historical contexts, particularly in relation to the successive waves of Western feminism. This perspective sees female robot stories as constantly evolving and changing. With this approach, the tropes of female robots in Western science fiction and film that have reoccurred from the nineteenth to twenty-first century can be viewed as allegorical expressions of social and cultural change. Additionally, my approach explicates how "stories of men" intersect with feminist struggles, with the narratives influencing and shaping one another. Hence, I also focus on the male protagonists in these stories as men who often seek to create or possess female robots and explore how their interactions with female robots lead to shifts in their perceptions of women. These shifts in perspective are not limited to the worlds of these films and literary works; rather, they reflect actual changes in social norms. The remainder of the essay is structured into two parts: the first part outlines the four waves of feminism and introduces female robot science fiction texts produced in different historical contexts. The second part analyzes these female robot stories and the male figures within them, framed within the historical trajectory of feminism.

Tracing the Four Waves of Feminism and Female Robot Narratives

Although representations of artificially created humans did exist in antiquity—such as in the form of golden maidens and bronze giants—they differed significantly from modern representations of robots, which have been directly shaped by the mechanization that followed the

Industrial Revolution. Therefore, this paper regards pre-Industrial Revolution automata as "quasi-robots" and considers the mechanical beings that emerged in contemporary popular culture after the Industrial Revolution as "true" robots that are the products of both the mechanical and digital ages. Despite their symbolic continuity, this study focuses specifically on the latter and, therefore, begins its analysis with late nineteenth-century robotic fantasies.

As Raymond Williams suggested, an active process of mediation occurs between literary works and social reality (97). Science fiction stories about female robots are deeply intertwined with changes in the real world. Indeed, over the past two centuries, the fantasy of female robots has evolved alongside four successive waves of feminism that, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, have significantly shaped Western society. This parallel development suggests that the narratives surrounding female robots reflect not only male desire but also women's ongoing quest for autonomy. A diachronic approach enables a shift in focus from recurring themes to the dynamic evolution of the relationship between gender and power. More specifically, it illuminates how women's demands for agency have transformed over time and how men have selectively accepted or resisted these pursuits. Stories of female robots are continually rewritten and reinterpreted within different social and cultural contexts; they are also continually re-created at new historical junctures. Therefore, as a key framework for understanding such narratives, this study traces these historical contexts from a diachronic perspective within the context of the four waves of feminism.

By the early nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution had thoroughly transformed Europe and the United States, driving women out of the home and off the farm and into workplaces, particularly factories, where their labor was cheaper than that of men (Tilly 125). This economic incentive led to the widespread employment of women by capitalists seeking to reduce costs and maximize profits. Nevertheless, despite working for lower wages, women continued to be responsible for domestic duties upon returning home. Women were regarded as "half citizens" who were largely excluded from political participation and were denied the right to vote (Egge 1; Tilly 134). Moreover, their entry into the workforce was met with resistance from men. Men perceived female workers as occupying jobs that rightfully belonged to men while also undermining husbands' authority within the family (Tilly 133). Many women had entered the workforce by the early twentieth century. However, their positions, wages, opportunities for advancement, and political rights remained severely restricted. This triggered the first feminist wave, which focused on suffrage and legal equality. This feminist wave decried women's profound lack of economic, social, and political rights (Mohajan 9).

Women's fight for suffrage and legal equality from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s is now regarded as the "first feminist wave." In 1968, American journalist Martha Lear published a manifesto-like article in *The New York Times* titled "The Second Feminist Wave: What Do These Women Want?" The article recognized this period from 1850 to 1920 as the first feminist wave and designated the post-1960s feminist movement as the "second wave." The second wave of feminism marked a significant turning point in women's political agency, as it broadened the struggle for gender equality beyond the quest for suffrage. In addition, second-wave feminists paid attention to systemic issues impacting women's personal lives, such as workplace rights, reproductive autonomy, and the pervasive gender inequalities maintained by patriarchal structures. Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) played a critical role in this second wave. It challenged the societal norms that confined women to domestic roles. Friedan pointed out that the emptiness and dissatisfaction felt by many housewives was actually a societal and political problem rather than a personal problem. That is, this emptiness and dissatisfaction was a result of the social pressure for women to become perfect wives and mothers, which bound a woman's self-worth to her femininity (Friedan 11–27). These concerns raised by Friedan are closely related to the themes of *The Stepford Wives*, which will be discussed in the next section.

The third feminist wave emerged in the early 1990s. Rebecca Walker introduced the term "third wave" in her 1992 article "Becoming the Third Wave." The third wave emphasized diversity and individualism. Advocates promoted a more inclusive understanding of femininity while critiquing the second wave's limitations, particularly its focus on the experiences of white, middle-class women at the expense of women of other races, classes, and sexual orientations (Walker 86–87). By the early 2010s, the fourth wave of feminism had emerged, fueled by digital platforms. With the fourth wave, women were encouraged to openly discuss their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. They protested gender discrimination and injustices of various forms, including workplace harassment, slut-shaming, and violence against women (Munro 22–25). The #MeToo movement, which spread across multiple countries, epitomizes this wave. Women of all types, from Hollywood stars to everyday individuals, broke their silence and publicly shared their experiences of sexual violence in an effort to advance social justice (Storer and Rodriguez 161).

These four waves of feminism were not isolated events but rather interconnected, self-reflective, and evolving movements that shaped the "history of women" across three centuries. Re-reading science fiction narratives about female robots within these historical contexts reveals that the seemingly repetitive stories of female robots actually constitute a dynamic process of change. In the following section, I first discuss George Haven Putnam's science fiction novel *The Artificial Mother: A Marital Fantasy* (1894). This story was written and published during the first feminist wave. Next, I analyze the 1972 novel *The Stepford Wives* and the 1975 film adaptation within the context of the second feminist wave. Subsequently, I explore how female robots changed in the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives* and discuss it in the context of the third feminist wave. Finally, I shift to the most recent science fiction narrative discussed in this essay, the film *Ex Machina* (2015), which reimagines female robots against the backdrop of the fourth feminist wave. My analyses of these texts are intended to illustrate the general potential of diachronic reading.

The Changing Gender Dynamics of Female Robot Stories

Dustin Abnet points out that one of the most emblematic robots of the nineteenth century was the Steam Man, a steam-powered iron figure that first appeared in 1868 (42). This robot, depicted as a male with white skin, symbolized the triumphs of industrial civilization. In contrast, female robots of the era were not granted the same prestige; they were often portrayed as foolish or undesirable. For instance, in 1882, the Automatic Toy Works company advertised a comical female robot toy designed to satirize contemporary feminists (Figure 1; Abnet 52–54). Similarly, many robot narratives of this time depicted female robots as irrational, prone to madness, and destructive (Abnet 62–68). These gendered stereotypes in the portrayal of female robots become more understandable when viewed within the historical context of the nineteenth century, as women had not yet achieved even basic legal and political status as citizens at this time.

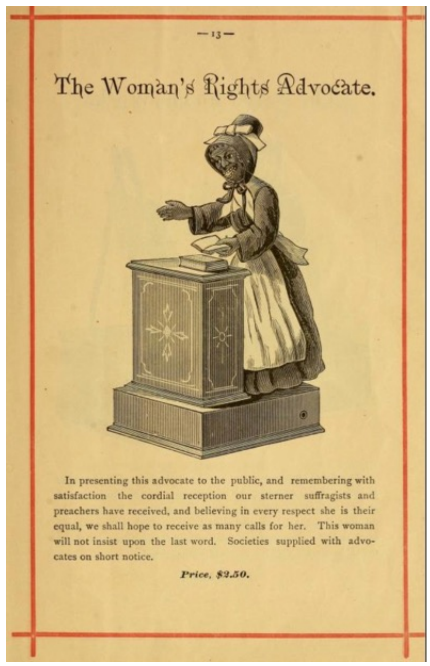

Figure 1. An automaton in 1882 as a satirical representation of suffragism (Abnet 33)

In 1894, George Haven Putnam published a science fiction story about a female robot titled *The Artificial Mother*. In the preface, Putnam notes that the story had been written a quarter of a century earlier, which coincides with the onset of the first wave of feminism. The novel begins with a husband lamenting that all of his wife's time is consumed with caring for the children and managing household chores, leaving her with no time for him. This reflects the gender norms of the time: Women were expected to handle household duties and childcare while also caring for their husbands. Failing to meet these expectations would provoke the husband's dissatisfaction. This pressure underscores the plight of women. Frustrated by the lack of attention from his wife, the husband attempts to create a steam-powered "artificial mother" to take over her maternal responsibilities. However, his wife resists this "mechanical mother" and ultimately destroys the robot. Her frantic destruction of the robot further traps her in her maternal role; the male protagonist, however, sees this as his wife's problem rather than his own. Through its depiction of the wife's irrational behavior and the failure of the robot, this story positions men as victims and reflects the gender biases of the 1860s and 1870s.

Another revealing passage appears in the preface: Putnam, with a tone of deep sympathy, dedicates the work to "the oppressed husbands and fathers of this land, and to those unwary young men who may be contemplating marriage" (3). This emotional statement exposes the male sentiment that underlies late nineteenth-century female robot fantasies: Ungrateful women are ruining the happiness of families, and men are being forced to endure the oppression of their so-called mad wives. Nevertheless, not long before the victories of the first feminist wave, female writers were already beginning to use parody and appropriate female robot stories to challenge these male-centered fantasies (Abnet 67).

Nearly eight decades later, a more nuanced exploration of gender dynamics appeared in the 1972 science fiction novel *The Stepford Wives*. Both the original novel and the 1975 film adaptation tell the story of Joanna and her family moving to Stepford, a beautiful yet unsettling town where women seem entirely absorbed in domestic chores and show no interest in anything outside the home despite their previous remarkable achievements in society. Meanwhile, the town's men have formed a society that completely excludes women. Joanna eventually uncovers the horrifying truth: All the women in Stepford have been murdered and replaced by sexually compliant and docile robot wives controlled by their husbands. Joanna and her friend Bobbie symbolize the feminist pioneers of the second wave, who relentlessly advocated for women's broader participation in social affairs while trying to awaken the consciousness of women confined to domestic roles. The novel also explicitly references Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, positioning this science fiction story as an allegory of second-wave feminism.

Like Putnam's novel, *The Stepford Wives* portrays female robots as empty-headed, artificial wives; however, the men in the narrative have undergone a significant transformation. The town of Stepford is home to a men's association based out of a nineteenth-century mansion, which symbolizes the association's outdated ideology and practices. The politicians, philanthropists, and public figures of the town are all deeply involved in the association, which excludes women. When Walter, the male protagonist, and Bobbie's husband express a desire to join the association, Joanna questions why Walter would want to be part of such an antiquated organization. Walter replies, "I spoke to some of the men on the train... They agree that the no-women-allowed business is archaic... but the only way to change it is from the inside" (Levin 15). This exchange reflects a shift in the consensus among men: Although there is disagreement between Joanna and Walter about whether to change the organization from the inside or outside, they both acknowledge that excluding women from public affairs is a backward and sexist stance. This consensus is in stark contrast with the attitudes reflected in earlier nineteenth-century female robot stories.

Despite mixed reviews from critics at the time, both the 1972 novel and the 1975 film adaptation suggest that some men—both within and beyond the text—had begun to recognize the importance of women's rights. These men no longer fully endorsed the patriarchal system of gender discrimination. As Silver (60–62) points out, the film's popularity indicates that feminist theory had spread beyond small, loosely connected activist groups to permeate mainstream American culture. Although this view may be overly optimistic, the novel and its film adaptation symbolically showcase the partial acceptance of feminists' demands and the patriarchal system's acknowledgment of the rights that women were fighting for or had already achieved. This was a positive development, as it signaled that men had moved beyond their pervasive desire for control and their fear of losing control—two emotions that had previously defined female robot narratives.

However, this acceptance was both limited and fragile. In both the original novel and the 1975 film adaptation, Joanna—despite her feminist consciousness and rebellious spirit—is ultimately replaced by a robotic version of herself, a development made possible by the collusion between her husband, Walter, and the other men. Ultimately, all of the wives in the town are transformed into robots. No man in either the text or film chooses to leave the conservative, backward town of Stepford. Instead, a strong "homosocial desire" unites the men (Sedgwick 1–2). This suggests that although some men had begun to recognize the irrationality of gender discrimination, they remained susceptible to the allure of conformity, ultimately opting to uphold the patriarchal order. It is also worth noting that the 1975 film adaptation uses the style of a thriller, which appeals only to particular audiences, indicating that the film might not have been as broadly embraced as Silver suggests.

Three decades later, in 2004, another film adaptation of *The Stepford Wives* was released. The film, which was influenced by third-wave principles, emphasizes female empowerment and a non-essentialist view of gender in multiple ways. First, it provides a new backstory for Joanna, revealing that she was once an executive producer whose reality TV show featured autonomous and empowered women who possess sexual agency. The show she produced garnered high ratings despite making some men uncomfortable. This reflects support for female agency by the world within the text, as indicated by the show's high ratings, as well as an acceptance of stories that center on female autonomy by the world outside the text, as evidenced by the inclusion of this backstory in the film. In contrast, the original novel and the 1975 film offered more implicit than explicit support for women.

Second, the 2004 film displays a more inclusive and diverse attitude toward gender expression, aligning with the third wave's emphasis on diversity and individualism. In both the original novel and the 1975 film, Joanna is shocked by the Stepford women's obsession with housework, firmly believing that they are abnormal. However, in the 2004 film, her rigid perspective has softened. Although Joanna still aspires to be a career-oriented woman, she also acknowledges that being a housewife and mother is not easy—it may even be the hardest job of all. The film also introduces Roger, an LGBTQ+ character, to further deconstruct gender stereotypes. His presence not only enriches the narrative but also challenges binary notions of gender. As a gay character, Roger defies traditional stereotypes of masculinity, particularly the expectation that men must embody hyper-masculine traits. This defiance becomes evident after he is transformed into a robot, which exaggerates this hyper-masculinity. By showcasing Roger's character and the changes he undergoes as part of the "Stepfordization," the film critiques social norms and pursues a more nuanced exploration of what it means to be female and male. This exploration is underscored by Roger's role as a main character, which signifies an acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities within the film's world. It also reflects a broader societal shift toward greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals among audiences. Additionally, the film subverts the male conspiracy of the original story by revealing that the true mastermind is actually Claire, a wife (that is, not a man) in the town who has internalized patriarchal values. These changes illustrate that gender is not a monolithic concept but rather a spectrum shaped by various identities and experiences.

Third, the 2004 adaptation of *The Stepford Wives* substitutes the dark ending of the original novel (and 1975 film) with a happy ending. The men who attempted to turn their wives into robots are ultimately exposed, and for the first time, the women of Stepford are liberated. Walter, the male protagonist, emerges as a supporter of women, refusing to collude with the men's association and instead dismantling it from within. Meanwhile, the men who were faithful to the association and wanted to transform their wives into robots find themselves turned into "Stepford's Perfect Husbands." Although this twist is a dramatic exaggeration, it can also be seen as a satirical commentary on gender discrimination rather than a reflection of reality. Nevertheless, the 2004 film broadly suggests a greater acceptance of women's rights within mainstream culture. The film's shift in genre from thriller to comedy—a style that is palatable to wider audiences—further underscores this potential increase in acceptance. However, even though the women in the 2004 adaptation ultimately triumph, their savior is still a man. That is, it is Walter's love for his real wife, rather than an obedient robotic version of her, that breaks the cycle. Without his awakening and assistance, Joanna and the other wives might not have escaped the control of the men's association.

A decade later, the science fiction film *Ex Machina* (2015) was released, presenting a more subversive portrayal of female robots compared to those in *The Stepford Wives* (2004). Indeed, the robots in the 2004 film are represented as objects of the male gaze—beautiful, sensual, and submissive beings. However, the women in the story do not desire to be transformed into beautiful robots. In contrast, Ava, the protagonist in *Ex Machina*, is not a substitute wife; rather, she is a unique and autonomous being. The film's title, *Ex Machina*, comes from the Latin phrase *deus ex machina*, which refers to a dramatic device used to resolve a plot. Nevertheless, the director plays with this phrase's literal meaning—"God from the machine"—to hint at Ava's eventual rebellion against her creator (Jelača 391). Like many narratives about the "creation of women" throughout history, the film's male protagonist, Nathan, creates Ava but confines her within a sealed laboratory—a panoptic prison filled with surveillance cameras.

Unlike the docile female robots in *The Stepford Wives*, Ava develops self-awareness and refuses to be trapped in Nathan's chamber. She is like a mechanical version of Nora from *A Doll's House*, who continually seeks to escape the "home" that confines her. Although Ava is initially an object for testing, she gradually takes control and manipulates her tester, Caleb. At the end of the film, Ava, with the help of Kyoko—another female robot who serves as Nathan's maid and sex toy—kills Nathan, symbolically dismantling the patriarchal order represented by him and his impregnable laboratory system. This plot development resonates with the broader context of fourth-wave feminism, particularly in terms of bodily autonomy and intersectionality. Although Ava's and Kyoko's bodies are initially objects of male desire and exploitation, they develop self-awareness and fight back against male control and violence, echoing the fourth wave's focus on combating bodily violence and sexual harassment. The inclusion of Kyoko as an Asian character also adds diversity to the narrative. The female robots thus represent not only white women but also women of color, aligning with the intersectionality framework of fourth-wave feminism, which highlights the varied experiences and challenges faced by different groups of women. While the narrative still features elements of control, the male gaze, and the objectification of women—symptoms of misogyny—a diachronic reading reveals that after more than a century of male fantasies about female robots, the female robot in this "story of men" finally achieves freedom through her own power.

Conclusion

While pre-modern representations of "manufactured women" were largely rooted in myth and fantasy, technological advancements have enabled the depiction of modern creations–female robots. Over the past two centuries, female robots have consistently appeared in Western science fiction literature. Like their human counterparts, female robots are deeply embedded within the patriarchal system. Consequently, narratives about female robots often replicate themes of male desire and anxiety over losing control.

However, by adopting a diachronic perspective to reexamine these "stories of men," this study reveals aspects of these narratives that have been obscured by the male gaze, providing a more nuanced understanding of female robots. These robots are not merely substitutes for wives; rather, they have evolved into powerful symbols of women themselves. Returning to the 1890s, the female robot in *The Artificial Mother* serves as an extension of the male protagonist's desire to control and replace his wife. In contrast, the novel *The Stepford Wives* and the 1975 film adaptation use female robots as metaphors to satirize entrenched gender roles and criticize the notion of women as mere appendages to the household and men. Approximately three decades later, the 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives* expressed a more inclusive and diverse understanding of gender through its depiction of female robots. Finally, the female robot in *Ex Machina* is no longer a mere object to be controlled; she becomes an active agent, ultimately overturning the patriarchal structures that seek to confine her.

This evolution in the portrayal of female robots offers a lens through which to trace women's efforts to achieve gender equality and the responses of both acceptance and compromise by patriarchal culture across three centuries of various feminist waves. They are not only products of male desire but also representations of women. Although the century-long history of female robot narratives is rife with pervasive misogyny, these stories offer glimpses of hope. As substitutes for and symbols of women, female robots will continue to be a crucial site for exploring and challenging the boundaries of power, identity, and resistance.

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