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Departmental Honors Thesis

<div align="center">Medieval Posthumanism: Disembodiment and Gendered Cyborgs in</div>

<div align="center">Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* and Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*</div>

Director Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina* is a disobedient fairytale that allegorically reimagines humankind's fall from paradise by imprisoning a female gendered cyborg, Ava—a shortened version of the name Chava, the Hebrew name for Eve—in a glass garden. The conflict of the film occurs when a young programmer, Caleb, is brought to the research lab of his employer, Nathan, to perform an adapted version of The Turing Test[1] on his state-of-the-art cyborg. Caleb develops a romantic attachment to Ava, and, upon learning that Nathan has been mutilating the previous prototypes in an attempt to create an artificially intelligent humanoid sex doll, Caleb forms a plan to escape with her. Nathan exposes that Caleb was brought in for this purpose: he sought to test Ava's capability to manipulate her way into freedom, proving her sentience through the intelligent use of her gendered body. Just as Nathan thinks he has thwarted Caleb's efforts, Ava escapes and violently kills her creator. She then exposes the mutilated, naked bodies of the previous prototypes and replaces her transparent limbs with theirs, adorning her technological body with their artificial skin. After dressing herself in a white gown, an ironic symbol of female purity, she exits the facility, leaving Caleb behind in a locked room to

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[1] This test, imagined by mathematician Alan Turing in the 1950s, was designed to prove the sentience of a computing machine. Interestingly, Alex Turing demonstrated the basis for the Turing Test through what he called a 'sexual guessing game', in an unseen man and woman are interrogated by a man in another room, who must determine who is the man and who is the woman: "Turing's point in introducing the sexual guessing game was to show that imitation makes even the most stable of distinctions (i.e., gender) unstable" (Halberstam 3). Though a careful analysis of the Turing Test itself falls beyond the scope of this paper, I think it is central to observe that gender has always been integrated into the discourse on performance, technology, and the difference between human and technologized beings.

suffocate. She walks into nature, shining as a precarious beacon against the green landscape and blurring the seemingly impassable border between natural and artificial.

This film, like many depictions of cyborgs, produces interruptions in the philosophical and social systems out of which the production of the gendered humanoid is born. Before diving into my argument and texts, it must, therefore, be made clear that the linguistic, metaphysical, and social structures of the so-called Western world are dominated by a fascination, even obsession with the simplicity of the binary opposition system. Identity, according to this system, maps onto the body according to predetermined, essentialist truths that are necessary for maintaining a particular vision of social order. Binary systems code the world with complementary classifications: organic vs. machine, normal vs. abnormal, good vs. evil, etc. Down to the most symbolic, even pronominal level, Western conceptions of reality divide the world along essentialized maleness and femaleness. Implicit in this structure, however, is the assertion that identity and its bodily manifestations are fluid, chaotic objects that must be controlled by the mapping and essentializing of their otherwise disruptive capacities. The insistence upon clearly demarcated, gendered bodies conflicts with the biological evidence that nature is far more fluid and disorganized that the systems we impose upon it. Identity has always been suffused with multiplicity and fluidity; thus, challenging the taxonomic systems of Western metaphysics requires not an expansion of these binaries or a blurring of them along a spectrum, but rather an embodied *violation* of them.

The monstrous and the hybrid body thus serve to productively upset normative definitions of human embodiment by forever changing the *fundamental logic* that sustains the systematic enforcement of binaries upon the body. Covertly analogous to the hybrid is the cyborg body that, through its excessive neural networks, human mimicry, and somatic disfigurations, defaces and

traverses the hierarchical architecture of binaries that are integral to Western metaphysical realities. For this project, I draw heavily from Donna Haraway's vision of cyborg body politics as outlined in her essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" in which she insists on a commonality between the robotic, the artificial, and the monstrous as productively disobedient bodies that resist the mechanisms of incorporation and unity. Wrapped up in the technologized cyborg are the binary coded precepts that catalyze its embodiment as well as the traversing of those very organizational principles.

The vision of a gendered cyborg body is not a modern invention. Rather, it is a complex, technologized intervention into a long-standing ontological struggle. Chaucer's Pardoner, a literary figure who has generated a history of dissentious scholarship due to the ambiguity of his body and sexuality, is one of the early predecessors to the cyborgs of *Ex Machina*. Today, I offer an imaginative intervention into the Pardoner that draws from the same philosophical productions out of which discourses on the cyborg are born. The Pardoner is a figurative cyborg of his own time. While Ava of *Ex Machina* fractures the distinction between human and non-human and exposes the technologies of gender, the Pardoner disobeys the strict border between male and female of his own time, revealing how this taxonomic, two-sex system is a *hypocritical* myth governing our reality.

If we situate the Pardoner in this posthuman, post-gender critical tradition, it becomes clear that both figures generate the same philosophical *work* as they denaturalize traditional assumptions about embodiment to favor the margins of human, non-human, and post-human life. They also serve to violently undermine the system of hierarchized power out of which those very territories were formed. Beyond their capacity to reveal the metaphysical mechanics of society and technologies of gender, I also wish to investigate the violence that is done to and by these

hybrid figures as they breach the systems for which they function as a border. In that process of exposition, these texts offer that taxonomy is inherently violent, and escaping this bifurcated structuring of our world necessitates deconstructive retaliation or vehement silence.

This paper will begin with an overview of both Western metaphysics important in my readings of non-normative bodies and the body politics of the cyborg as I illustrate the interrelated features of the body, technology, and the binaries that control our relationship to them. I will explore how the Middle Ages, not unlike contemporary scholarship on cyborgs, expressed a consistent anxiety about the capacity of hybridity to undo its structures of power and social order. I will then utilize two case studies of hybridity in literature and film, beginning with the androids of Alex Garland's film; I will demonstrate how the bodies of Ava and Kyoko expose the technologies and mechanics of gender in Western societies and how the themes of the film surpass the very boundaries that it initially establishes. Moving back into the medieval period, I will compare the figure of Chaucer's Pardoner, using the lens of medieval surgery, to my readings of the cyborg to explore the similar threats he represents. Lastly, I will address the violence done by each of these figures in their respective narratives as I suggest that recrafting the body produces and demands acts of violence in order to transgress the bifurcations of society.

I. Christian Myths and Western Ontology

Three key elements of Western metaphysics are necessary for understanding both embodiment and its implications for the marginalization of hybrid bodies: The Great Chain of Being, the myth of original unity, and the binary system. These three features of Western metaphysics persist from ancient Greek philosophy into medieval Europe, and they are still the principal conceptualizations of reality, human bodies, and power that shapes many Western experiences of embodiment today.

The Great Chain of Being

The Great Chain of Being is a metaphysical conceptualization of all life and matter based upon the notion of an immutable, organized hierarchy. In the medieval era, the Chain of Being was thought to have been designed and decreed by God; therefore, not only is hierarchy naturalized and essentialist, but it is also an exemplary manifestation of divine law[2]. The Chain begins with the purest, most powerful being—God—from whom all life and meaning emmintate and then proceeds downwards to lesser, increasingly irrational forms of life, ranking them according to their closeness to perfection and rationality. In this structuring, spirit is cast as superior to the physical or material world, and thus, spiritual and intellectual pursuits are more noble, for they elevate a person closer to divinity. The body, conversely, is cast as the opposing force to upward movement; the needs and desires of the body or flesh move a person away from God and closer to the inferior animals, plants, and minerals of the sublunar realm[3]. The cosmology of The Chain of Being was widely influential in the medieval period, both theologically and politically; in fact, the feudal system, in which a king is divinely ranked relative to subordinate human roles, is a political application of The Chain of Being that in turn generates fixed social order, including the naturalized subjugation of women to men based on the conforming function and appearance of their bodies.[4]

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[2] The basic organizational principle of the Great Chain of Being derives from the philosophical worldviews of Plato, Aristotle# and the Neoplatonists, though the specifics of the Chain were solidified throughout the Scholastic period by medieval thinkers and philosophers, namely Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas#, who classified all living things in a hierarchical ordering according to rationality and Christian notions of perfection.

[3] In Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, a widely influential philosophical text in medieval Europe, demonstrates the logic of this system when he states that "the condition of human nature is just this; man towers above the rest of creation so long as he realizes his own nature, and when he forgets it, he sinks lower than the beasts. For other living things to be ignorant of themselves, is natural; but for man it is a defect" (Boethius 42).

[4] This is demonstrated in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, where writes that "by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates" (Aquinas 92.1.2).

According to the organizational logic of the Chain of Being, all life shares a common, unified origin, and this notion of origin is central to many medieval Christian doctrines, which propose that the natural world began in a perfect, innocent, and unified state until its fall into multiplicity and division. The Garden of Eden offers that the ultimate goal of human efforts is to return to original unity by seeking the perfect oneness of God. This Myth of Original Unity, then, posits that the sublunar, fleshy realm is a fallen state of being, and that truer reality can be found by transcending its limitations and returning to an imagined sense of non-corporeal perfection. Feminist scholars have critiqued this myth as it has often adapted *phallocentric* properties that disproportionately affect women and other marginalized bodies. A return to the divine Father necessitates assimilation into a naturalized gender hierarchy and disfavors the role of the body, to which women have been linked throughout history.

The body, often coded feminine, has traditionally been discounted, often demonized, as the naturally inferior opposite to the higher-level ordered intellect, which is coded masculine. In medieval Europe, in fact, the body, or *flesh*, was commonly envisaged as a wayward auxiliary of the soul or self. The unreliable, fragile, and perishable body was imagined as shell or casing for the superior mind, and embodiment must be transcended through intellectual and spiritual pursuits. This philosophical position has dominated the popular imagination, and medieval theologians and philosophers continued in this tradition as Christian notions of spirituality and sin developed and spread. The body, in all its fleshy glory, is linked with all sinful behavior— sexual arousal, fragility, consumption, and the creation of waste—and it has traditionally been relegated to a low status in Christian doctrines.

While medieval Christianity disapproved of the body and material embodiment as a corruptible, feminized hurdle of the human condition, the era nevertheless reports a persistent

fascination with the body "as the site of all possible self-expression" (Kay and Rubin 5),

including the expression of spiritual development. The body was a contested site of *privilege*,

that, as medievalist Bill Burgwinkle examines, was imaginined with the capacity to unveil truth,

transform, and metamorphosize; thus, the body exists within the tension of difference, change,

and hybridity[5] all while purported to be of spiritual and political importance. This tension in the

medieval conception of the body led to underlying collective anxieties regarding the instability

and ambiguity of human life, revealing that "the language of the body politic is one that can also

be turned against its users" (Kay and Rubin 6) when the hierarchies it imposes are threatened,

deconstructed, or exposed as fundamentally inefficient.

Systems of Binaries and Gender Essentialism

The hierarchical distinction between the body and spirit that supports the Chain of Being

is an extension of another significant fixture of Western metaphysics: a binary opposition

system. The notion of a binary posits two main assumptions about reality: one, that all things can

be categorized and defined according to their inherent characteristics; two, that the world is

organized by naturalized dualisms. This system depends upon complementary yet oppositional

pairs thought to be self-evident features of life, matter, and reality itself. Binary systems code the

world with complementary classifications: organic vs. machine, normal vs. abnormal, good vs.

evil, etc. In fact, in many Western or Christian creation myths, creation occurs when distinctions

are made out of unidentifiable matter: to create is to inscribe the world with borders of

difference. These borders and boundaries are not latent features of the world; they are the

philosophical and metaphysical motors of many Western societies that govern human life and

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[5] The body of Christ, to offer an example, was a contested site of anxiety due to his capacity to blur the lines between animal and spiritual, and many medieval scholars have suggested that the practice of transubstantiation, in which the hybrid, often feminized or androgenized body of Christ is consumed, exposed the instability of the body due to its capacity to transform once consumed.

generate identity, hierarchy, and violence through systematic and naturalized taxonomies. This organizational logic in turn generates hierarchical structures of power by favoring particular modes of expression over their inferior counterparts. As feminist scholar Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo explains in her work on sex-difference,

> Western philosophy has been a primary culprit in the establishing and maintaining of dualisms in which the characteristics of the first terms of each dichotomous pair have been prioritized and the second terms have been rendered subordinate or invisible. (11)

This feature of Western metaphysics propagates fixed notions of gender difference by insisting upon a naturalized, biologically-governed, two-sex system: masculinity is associated with the mind, culture, and rationality, while femininity, its inferior opposite, is linked to the body, nature, and emotion. This ontology of complementary distinction promotes *male morphology* as the norm, from which its feminine counterpart diverges. Persisting from Greek philosophy, the favoring of masculinized embodiment effectively transforms the female body into a conceptual sign to represent the deformed male morphology. According to medievalist Liz Herbert McAvoy,

> Woman occupied a highly problematic cultural space and frequently became translated into an expression of cultural monstrosity. According to the influential Aristotelian legacy, for example, women lack the physical completeness and intellectual Perfection of the rational male, resulting in physical deformity and moral weakness. (McAvoy 56)

The logic of a complementary or binary system positions the feminine and female embodiment as the object to be "absorbed and displaced by the masculine" (Bloodsworth-Lugo 13), thus naturalizing the assumed hierarchical differences and subjugation.

Gender essentialism is supported by this philosophical foundation of a gender binary, generating a two-sex model. Early Christian doctrines, following in the Greek tradition, advanced that there are only two distinct sexes created by the Christian God; gendered systems or codes then become immutably necessary for maintaining and policing the boundaries between these stable differences. This two-sex system institutes a universalized essence to gender that historically positions women in unfavorable social positions due to their association with the body. This trend is explored in Sarah Kay and Mari Rubin's text, *Framing Medieval Bodies*, where they argue that the rejection of the body is part of "the dialectically related process of ordered division, through schemes of knowledge and systematic hierarchies, many of which depend on a gendered division of the world" (6). Binary systems, gender essentialism, and the Great Chain of Being are deeply interconnected by these philosophical assumptions.

II. The Import of Body Studies

Depictions of the body in literature and the discourses that surround the treatment of embodied experiences are notably unsettled and complex, likely due to the body's inferior position in the Western philosophical schematic. The body, however, is the most formative and dominant aspect of the human experience, for it determines one's experience of power, concept of selfhood, and relationship to violence: it is the source, tool, and site of human desire and experience. One of the most productive spheres of interaction amongst feminist, posthumanist, and poststructural scholarship has been a collective interest in reclaiming the contours of the body and its communicative potential to redefine and challenge the ways in which traditional patriarchal structures generate standards of normalcy that disproportionately harm and control deviant or "abnormal" bodies. The body, particularly those categorized as deviant or hybrid, is therefore a "challenge to the dichotomies and hierarchies of established categories" (Kay and

Rubin 6). I thus wish to consider how the prevalence of Western metaphysical conceptions of power have influences bodies that violate the hierarchies. What happens when the logic that sustains notions of power and difference are breached? The cyborg offers in its embodiment a literal and figurative suberversion of the notion of power that continues to damage the Western notion of the body and the violence that is done to it in order to contain it.

III. Cyborg Politics and Feminist Technoscience

As previously stated, this paper draws heavily from Donna Haraway's "ironic political myth" (1)—her vision of cyborgs and their body politics as outlined in her 1985 essay "A Manifesto for Cyborgs". Her vision of cyborg politics rests on the cyborg's capacity to dismantle the myth of original unity that generates differences along the borders of gender, class, and race, offering human societies new visions of freedom, identity, and power. For Haraway, the cyborg breaches and violates the binary-coded reality posited by Western ontology, undoing the valorization of scientific control that constructed its body and displaying the machinery of naturalized identity markers, thus breaching the logic of these persistently violent systems of power. Cyborgs "suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms" (Haraway 19) by existing beyond and within these organizing principles.

Cyborg politics is fundamentally about the body as it exposes the instability of the body as a category, muddying and violating the stability of the body's organizational categories and postures. The cyborg body is unnatural yet mimics the human form; it is genderless yet materialized within recognizable, gendered features; it is often sexualized yet fundamentally sexless; it is multiple yet synthesized as a single entity. Thus, the figurative power of the cyborg exposes that the categories traditionally perceived as naturalized or biological realities are actually programmable and performative layers. Its ontology displays the mechanisms of

Western metaphysics that generate naturalized notions of gender, offering a"new ground upon which to argue that gender and its representations are technological productions" (Halberstam 1). Gender can no longer be read as a naturalized binary when the cyborg exposes that gender is "a multiple construction dependent upon random formations beyond masculine or feminine" (Halberstam 10). Thus, the lines that guard systems of power, that generate notions of normalcy, are violated by the gendered cyborg as it "revels in the confusion of boundaries" (Halberstam 6) and reveals the artifice of gender differentiations. Let us now consider how Haraway's notion of cyborg body politics manifests in a contemporary depiction of cyborg bodies, Alex Garland's film *Ex Machina*. I argue that Garland's film offers a nuanced conversation on the body of the cyborg, opening the door for its philisophical and somatic inquiries to be applied to other hybrid figures, such as Chaucer's Pardoner.

III. The Body Politics and Violence of *Ex Machina*

Though much has been written about Ava's intelligence and capacity for artistic creation[6], I wish to raise an embodied consciousness regarding her physical embodiment. The film incorporates and transcends questions of womanhood and focuses rather on the role of the body in creating social meaning and control. The film's depiction of the body is complex yet cautious, and though it navigates hostile themes of masculinity and technology, it continually emphasizes that "the body survives" (Garland 1:04:05), an almost metatheatrical reminder that it is Ava's body that deserves our attention and inquiry. Unlike the purpose of the Turing Test, which aims to correlate the mind and the machine, *Ex Machina* argues that it is the *body*, the humanoid materiality and not the mind that enables Ava to pass as a gendered human.

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[6] Brian R. Jacobson, in his article "*Ex Machina* in the Garden", examines Ava's role as an artist and argues that the film intentionally explores how technology is an extension of art. Hayley Wilson, in her article "The 'I' in AI: Emotional Intelligence and Identity in *Ex Machina*", argues that the film's manipulation of The Turing Test is actually an investigation of Ava's capacity to mimic and develop human emotion.

The test that Ava truly passes is that of a *embodied woman*: she utilizes her sexualized and gendered body to generate contrived intimacy with Caleb that will eventually initiate her escape[7]. In fact, Ava's intellect is never manifestly doubted. Early in their conversations, Nathan insists that Caleb not loiter on the workings of her mind: "Just answer me this. "What do you *feel* about her? Nothing analytical. Just . . . how do you feel?" (Garland 28). Caleb is subconsciously testing and prodding her gendered body, determining, through his own emotional, panoptic, and sexual impulses, if Ava is appropriately performing as a gendered human. The narrative drive of the film, then, can only persist by weakening the territories between the human and the mechanical, between the masculine and the feminine, for the overarching movement of its plot advances the viewer from a state of bifurcation into a blurred uncertainty about where technology truly begins and ends.

The Pardoner has generated a similar anxious attention regarding the body and its subversive potential. No other pilgrim in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* has prompted such a fascination with their body or an irresolute questioning of their identity as a result. In fact, no other pilgrim detailed in *The General Prologue*—the introductory framework of the Canterbury Tales that describes each pilgrim—is offered as much bodily attention as the Pardoner: of the forty lines devoted to him, nearly half detail the specifics of his appearance alone. These lines infamously conclude with the narrator's statement, "No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;/As smothe it was as it were late shave./I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (Chaucer 689-691), a description that, though equivocal, nevertheless relies on the social myth of the gender binary. Other than the textual inconclusivity of the Pardoner's anatomy or, as we would deem it today, gender expression, the text explains that he rides bare-headed with his long,

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[7] In an early version of the script, in fact, when Ava is first described to the reader, it states that "the one part of her that is not obviously an inorganic construct is her face" (Garland, 18), an indication that she was created to be viewed immediately as human due to her appearance of organic, physical normality.

yellow hair unbound and spread thinly over his shoulders. The Pardoner's eyes are glaring like a hare and he speaks with a high-pitched voice, which is compared to a goat, and later, the Pardoner described his own neck as long and thin. The text explains that the Pardoner would never have a beard. Considering these features, we see how both the Pardoner's anatomy as well as his gender expression are questionably inconclusive when considering the strict two-sex system of medieval England which was even enforced through the Sumptuary Laws that enforced coded cosmetics and apparels onto bodies based on class and sex.

Since Clyde Walter Curry's critical overview in 1919 titled "The Secret of Chaucer's Pardoner", the Pardoner's body has been diagnosed as a collection of "symptoms" (Zarnis) pointing to his underlying "secret" that must be unpacked in order to determine the moral implications of his tale. Medieval scholarship on the Pardoner sought to cure him of his bodily ambiguity by proving, through sparse clues in the original text, exactly where he falls on the gender and sexuality spectrum. Due to the moral nature of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, scholars have linked the textual humor and commentary of the Pardoner's body with a representation of his flawed soul or faulty masculinity, necessitating a reading of the aforementioned lines that the Pardoner is either a eunuch or an effeminate, possibly queer man (Zarnis). Scholars have variously turned to medieval medical practices, the study of Christian relics, complexion theories, animal imagery, and the like, all to decode his body and substantiate an authoritative reading. These readings, though conclusively disparate, insist on speaking of the Pardoner as *lacking* due to his failure, either bodily or cosmetically, to adhere to an essentially unitary vision of medieval masculinity. Plurality is refused to a marginalized body that knowingly rejects cohesive identity and seeks to be seen and heard.

Medieval scholar Robert S. Sturges in his text *Chaucer's Pardoner and Gender Theory* experimentally synthesizes posthumanist and feminist scholarship in order to suggested that, despite the contentious, burdensome history of scholarship on the Pardoner's body, the text itself denies such categorization even as it navigated textual biases and anxieties: "Chaucer's narrator refuses – or is unable – to speak of the Pardoner's gender univocally, summoning instead an equivocal formula for implying that the Pardoner cannot be so easily pinned down" (27). Chaucer's notorious description that the Pardoner "were a geldyng or a mare" (Chaucer 691) undeniably presents the Pardoner's body as the site where certainty dissolves; he intentionally fails to delineate where the Pardoner falls on either side of that binary; thus, the text denies the possibility of an authoritative reading altogether. This is not to suggest that the unknowability of the body scars it as unfit for critical attention; rather, it leaves us with the spaces where the Pardoner and his body create meaning out of that very unknowability. We are left, akin to the cyborg Ava, *only* with his body, only with the physical presence of an ambiguously embodied person who continually revels in the complex confusion of the gender binary.

The Pardoner's body is most suspect in *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, for he both traverses gender boundaries and reinforces them through the suggestion of his anatomical lack. His masculinity possibly lacks anatomy, implied in the suggestion that he could never grow a bear, and his gender expression lacks the consistency that proves his role within a two-sex system. He is also a fractured body who is carrying parts of other fractured bodies as false relics, offering a problematic, potentially monstrous figure according to medieval standards of wholeness. If *Ex Machina* explores how Ava's humanity is imaginatively legitimized through her capacity to correctly perform gender, then the language employed to describe the Pardoner examines the effect of a "falsely" gendered body on the boundaries that he is meant to maintain,

thus "anticipating a call to denaturalize the category of bodily sex" (Sturges 42) and its

manifestations on the body itself. Akin to the design of Ava's mechanics, which complicates and

blurs the borders between where technology begins and ends, the Pardoner's gender expression

defies the traditional demarcations of where his masculinity and femininity tapers off or switches

into its supposed opposite.

Both the gendered cyborg of Garland's film as well as the Pardoner weaken the territories

between male and female, denaturalizing the expectations for the manifestation of gender on the

body. Ava serves as a complex metaphor for the violation of sex through her ironic recreation of

the borders, and the Pardoner challenges the notion of gendered self-expression by denying the

reader a coherent reading of his body altogether. The Pardoner is not simply transversing the

gender binaries, but he actually violates them, undermining the social and political logic that

enforced gender and sex difference in the medieval period. The hybridity of these figures is what

makes them so threatening to a Western social world, for they defy the capacity to demarcate

where power structures can take hold on a body. This is not unlike discourses surrounding

intersex individuals, whose hybrid bodies defy systems of binaries that would otherwise

demarcate the body with power, order, and control. Hybridity, both that of the Pardoner and well

as the cyborg, challenges the very metaphysical structures that in turn generate power.

Ironic Borders and Phallocentric Hypocrisy

In order to escape and survive in the world outside of Nathan's lab, Ava must, in a

moment of philosophical irony, recreate the border between human and machine by cloaking her

technologized body in flesh. However, this action also flexes and stretches the capacity of the

differences between machine and human. She simultaneously regenerates the border between

machine and human, between gender and the body, while also confounding the logic of those

borders beneath her feminized exterior. In doing so, she exhibits that the relationships between gender, technology, and the body are "imitative system[s]" (Halberstam 3) and communicative placeholders: the border between male and female is as indeterminate and unstable as the border between human and machine even as Ava must occupy and perform them in order to survive. Her body, then, figuratively and literally exposes the performative mechanics of the two-sex system as well as the philosophical logic that controls and labels human bodies within that schematic.

It is Ava's skin, the appearance of normalcy and the suggestion of participation within its codes and behaviors, that prepare the audience to view these cyborgs as human, as whole. The cyborg's power is not only the capacity to blur boundaries by passing within their codes, but also their propensity to unveil the monstrosity and mechanics beneath them. They are an embodied metaphor of the inner workings beneath the categories of sex and gender. At another point in the film, Kyoko, a mute female cyborg of Nathan's invention, peels back the skin of her face, revealing a metallic skull beneath. Later that night, Caleb, staring desperately into a mirror, slices open his hand with a razor blade and wipes the blood against his reflection, as if to prove to himself which side of the binary he belongs to, as if to recreate the territory of difference between the humans and the cyborgs that has become increasingly abstract and discoherent. He must violently peer into his own body to "prove" its legitimacy with blood. Thus, Caleb's action is not an abject response to confronting the other, but rather a disruptive experience with the Uncanny—an unsettled recognition that, beneath layers of social codes, cultural anatomies, and even our own human skin, is a mechanical materiality: a complex, unfixed network of performance, of interlocking systems that do not exist within the boundaries and logic offered by Western metaphysics or Christian myths of original unity. The bodies of these cyborgs violently

remind us that we too are performing as human, passing as coded beings in an otherwise ambiguous and unstable world. These hybrid bodies "displace the social privilege dependent upon stable categories" (Halberstam 1) of normal or properly gendered exposing both the underlying multiplicity beneath the skin as well as the social technologies that continue to assert the boundaries between human and monstrous.

It is in moments like these that the film reminds audiences that violence is necessarily interwoven with the creation and management of hybrid bodies. In fact, Ava is first introduced through the foreboding, unsettled framework of violence. Upon entering her chamber for the first time, Caleb observes a place in the glass wall that appears to have been broken from the inside; the very space that holds Ava is scarred with an indication of past, now abstract abuses. Violence speaks before Ava does. The broken glass serves, then, as a ominous symbol for the invisible barrier that the film will eventually fracture. While the organizational logic of Western metaphysics reinforces a clear delineation between the constructed opposites of the binary, the film flexes this difference by suggesting that those very barriers are in fact transparent, abstract bifurcations that both do violence to those entrapped by them and also demand violence in response. Ava's final escape from the glass cage demands extensive violence done to the very men who created and confined her. Thus, her final act is not only the death of the masculine power structures that created her body, but also the symbolic destruction of the abstract binary borders that trapped her behind the glass cage.

Likewise, the Pardoner exposes the same logic that sustains naturalized, gendered power structures. The medieval figure of the hermaphrodite illuminates the threat and subversive potential that the Pardoner occupies. In scholar Leah DeVun's historical analysis of medieval medical surgery surrounding intersex individuals, she examines how practices in medieval

surgery, which surgically or cosmetically "corrected" intersex individuals by fitting their

genitalia into a two-sex system, was rooted in essentialist assumptions about the human body.

This practice of surgery sought to cure intersex individuals of abnormalities that conflicted with

practices in law, linguistics, and marital sex. Since women were barred from giving testimonies,

being witnesses in court, inheriting property, serving in the priesthood, or working in many

industries, the desire to cure the bodies of so-called sexual abnormalities fundamentally served

the larger social need and fantasy for wholeness through distinctive sexual differences.

To cure the body was to bring it into conformity by literally reshaping it within essentialist

roles and positions of the larger community; proper sexual roles were thought to prevent excess,

monstrosity, and deviancy from permeating medieval society. The correction of sexual anatomy

and gender expression restored a person's proper social role, sexual role, and bodily appearance

in order to police the line between the human and the non-human: "surgeons were responsible for

hewing human bodies to a transcendent order" (DeVun 32) that served the metaphysical

organization of the Great Chain of Being[8]. To be a properly actualized human, according to these

practices, necessitates the participation within conventional gender expression; those who violate

the border of masculine and feminine disrupt the social body as a whole, undermining the

systems of power that facilitate the superior policial, economic, and social positions of men.

These practices, however, exist on a precariously contradictory border: "surgeons

maintained that gender roles and bodily shapes were 'natural' [yet] they devoted considerable

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[8]According to DeVun, there were two popular frameworks for categorizing intersex individuals in the medieval period. The Hippocratic/Galenic understanding of sexual difference thought of sexuality as a spectrum; thus, the hermaphrodite was a "perfect balance of male and female" (DeVun 21). The Aristotelian perspective argued that intersex individuals "were not an intermediate sex but a case of doubled or superfluous genitals" (DeVu 21). Despite their differences, both approaches "emphasized the roles of the interior humors establishing sex" (DeVun 21); the internal body and the external appearances were separated but mutually influential upon each other. This belief was linked to stereotypical assumptions about gender and sexual behavior. The correction of genitals was also a means of clarifying and solidifying sexual roles: an individual's expression of sex "affected the flow of power between man and woman: (29). The surgeon's craft aims to return the body to its natural or original form in order to solidify how the internal functions should manifest as behavior, desire, and social role.

energy to articulating precisely what the sexes were and should remain" (DeVun 35). Thus, great

importance was given to the *performance* of gender as prescribed by the dominant culture of the

era. Though I do not wish to read him as an intersex individual in order to avoid the same

taxonomic scholarship that has burdened his body thus far, the Pardoner's body does produce a

similar anxiety about embodiment and hybridity by hypocritically occupying a traditional male

space all while intentionally blurring gender difference and remaining silent on the matter of his

physical anatomy. His complex gender expression thus undermines medieval social order,

natural order, and their manifestation in the legal system of the 14th and 15th centuries. As

medieval scholar Kim Zarnis examines, this subversive power that Pardoner offers extends

beyond his physical embodiment:

> In the description of the Pardoner . . . we confront dichotomies with implied
>
> hierarchies—body and soul, fakes and relics, rhetoric and truth. With his body and his
>
> words, the Pardoner takes these reductive dichotomies and flips them, entwines them, and
>
> implicates his audiences with uncomfortable truths (Zarnis).

The Pardoner, similar to the cyborg Ava, displaces the privileges of a dichotomized society by

exposing the performative layers of the medieval notion of gender as well as the authority of

religious figures to police those systems: his body violates borders and his actions expose the

hypocrisy that sustains them. As he oscillates between genders and erotic practices, failing to

adhere to the laws and expectations of a masculine body, the Pardoner nevertheless asserts

himself as a spiritual and masculine authority.

The role of masculine figure, even when visibly incoherent, can be constructed as a role,

a veil, which the Pardoner adorns to gain favor with his audiences and to assert the masculine

control of the Church. His authority is constructed by relying on patriarchal systems of power all

while ironically exposing that masculine authority is *only* a role; even a body with incoherent anatomical makeup and indeterminate gender expression can assume the power of the binary system. Thus, if Ava's political potential is her capacity to unveil the technology of gender at work in many Western societies, then the Pardoner, in a similar vein, deconstructs the manner in which gender *authorizes* control in his society. Thus, the Pardoner, foreshadowing the figure of the cyborg, poses as a threat of "the potential for disruption of patriarchal hierarchies" (Sturges 2), though this threat is eventually disciplined through the categorization of his unruly body through Harry Bailey's response that violently enforces taxonomy and anatomy onto the Pardoner's suspect body, silencing him and his tale,

I argue that the self-purported hypocrisy of the Pardoner is not necessarily a reflection of his moral well-being, as some scholars have suggested; rather this characterization is an *extension* of his propensity to unveil the hypocrisy of a two-sex system. He unveils the source of his authority (his assumed male body) all well challenging the manner in which that identity manifests itself on that body (his gender expression), paralleling the strategy by which he manipulates audiences into redeeming themselves for greed all while verbally securing greed as the source of his actions. His voice as a hypocrite permeates his fluid, flexing body.

If Ava's potential is her capacity to unveil the technology of gender, the Pardoner, in a similar vein, deconstructs the manner in which gender *authorizes* control. Thus, the Pardoner, foreshadowing the figure of the cyborg, poses as a potential disruption of patriarchal hierarchies, though this threat is eventually disciplined through the categorization of his unruly body when Harry Bailey, the innkeeper and host of the pilgrims, violently responds to the Pardoner's tale. I have translated Harry Bailey's threat to underscore the severity of his response: he states,

I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond

In stide of relikes or of seintuarie.

Lat kutte hem of, I wol thee helpe hem carie;

They shul be shryned in an hogges toord!"(Chaucer 952-955).

This comment is not only violent due to threat of the action, but also because it enforces male anatomy onto a body that denies categorization. Implicit in Harry Bailey's response is the fear of bodily ambiguity and the insistence that the he clear up, by literally grasping the Pardoner's body, exactly how his anatomy functions or lacks within a particular social system. This response, much like Caleb's in *Ex Machina*, violently insists on defining just where the Pardoner sits on the gender and sex binary through violent, threatening means.

While the cyborg Ava responds to her entrapment with homicidal revenge, the Pardoner remains silent. In choosing not to respond, he subverts the expectations of a threatened body by denying access to control over his body and forever silencing the fear in Harry Bailey's threat. Denying Harry Bailey a response repudiates the symbolic exchange where language speaks for the anatomy of the body: for the Pardoner to confirm or to deny Harry Bailey's threat would be to inscribe himself within the confines of masculinity that he has intentionally obscured. Thus, the Pardoner's silence exists outside of the symbolic, outside of the realm where meaning is imposed upon identity, and thus a key support to the system of binaries is also denied. Silence functions as a violent response to the clarity of control that these binaries enforce upon the body.

IV. Breaching the Myth of Wholeness

If we read the Pardoner alongside the figure of cyborg, we see that they both ironically and productively recreate the very borders of gender that their physical embodiment violates. These figures and their incoherent identities undermine the metaphysical notion that gender and sex map onto the body according to naturalized or biological realities. The fractured, oscillating

subjectivities of both the cyborgs and the Pardoner expose the threat of hybridity to social and political systems all while pushing back against the very power structures that necessitate the notion of bodily hybridity in the first place.

Both of these texts leave us with the spaces where the body creates meaning out of its unknowability. We are left *only* with the physical presence of ambiguously embodied persons who continually revel in the complex violation of the gender binary and the demarcations of what it means to be an embodied person. The violence of these texts calls the readers and viewers to address their own complicit violence in the maintenance of the binary system that continues to threaten the bodies we label as hybrid or monstrous. At this juncture in posthuman studies, we must embrace a recognition that the body, both the technological and the medieval, ought not culminate into coherent unity or harmony within the Western vision of perfection. As we journey into an increasingly disembodied world, the treatment of bodies, particularly deviant or so-called unnatural ones, will define our ethical and social futures. The Pardoner and the cyborgs of *Ex Machina* teach us that we must undermine the bifurcated systems of the past as we reimagine what it means to be human. The myth of wholeness has been breached. Our creation stories must be retold, not to imagine unity as our original state of being, but to reject the idea of origins in the first place. We were born out of chaos, not despite it.

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