


Article

# Artificial Life, Divinity, and Mythology in *Star Trek*

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**Abstract:** The *Star Trek* franchise's depiction of artificial intelligence (AI) and affiliated technologies—namely, supercomputers, androids, and holograms—evokes common themes and motifs from the myths of the ancient Mediterranean. This article analyzes the mythological underpinnings of *Star Trek*'s historical treatment and approach to AI, from *The Original Series* to *The Next Generation* and up through the newest additions to the canon, *Short Treks*, and *Picard*. AI in *Star Trek*, like Data, the Doctor, and Zora, expresses qualities associated with divinity: superhuman strength, intelligence, and agelessness. These very qualities distinguish them from humans and bar them from considerations of personhood. Like the Greek gods of myth, AI can present as immortal, which fundamentally distinguishes it from mortal humans, as seen in the tensions between gods and humans in Homer's *Odyssey* and the *Homeric Hymns*. The ancient tension between mortal and immortal is manifested in the combative relationship between organic creator and artificial creation, a common sci-fi trope, that can lead to a cycle of fear and hostility evocative of the divine generational warfare in Hesiod's *Theogony*. The artificial–organic tension resonates with the contemporary audience's conflicted experiences with evolving technologies and problematizes the show's presentation of the evolution of humanity into a posthuman existence. Just as mythology is used to consider humanity relative to the divine, narratives about AI are fertile ground to analyze what it means to be human and establish parameters for what is decidedly not human.

**Keywords:** *Star Trek*; artificial intelligence; AI; mythology; immortality; android; hologram; synthetic; posthuman; Homer; Hesiod; Ovid



**Citation:** Norgard, Amy L. 2024. Artificial Life, Divinity, and Mythology in *Star Trek*. *Religions* 15: 436. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15040436>

Academic Editor: Sylvie Magerstädt

Received: 30 November 2023

Revised: 12 March 2024

Accepted: 15 March 2024

Published: 31 March 2024



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## 1. Introduction

The science fiction (SF) genre has been a fruitful place to reconsider the narratives, characters, and ideas from the ancient Mediterranean (Keen 2006; Liveley 2006; Brown 2008; Gloy 2015; Rogers and Stevens 2015; Keen 2017; Wenskus 2017; Clare 2022). This approach, called classical reception, traces the influence of ancient Greece and Rome and the wider ancient Mediterranean to later time periods and across media (for example, music, art, theater, literature, film, television, comics, video and tabletop games). Classical reception is an interdisciplinary field that analyzes how and why later interpretations of antiquity have changed over time, place, and media to suit the interests of an ever-changing audience, renewing the study of antiquity for new generations. Classical reception works against the notion that ancient literature and culture represent humanity's static and idealized past. In reception, interpretations of antiquity are contingent on audience reception—or, in the words of Charles Martindale, an early scholar in classical reception theory, “Meaning [. . .] is always realized at the point of reception” (Martindale 1993, p. 3). As Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens argue in *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, both SF and the myths and literature from antiquity “continue to address urgent and fundamental questions about humanity in the world”, even when considering “a technoscientific world” that science fiction imagines (Rogers and Stevens 2015, p. 19). In this same volume, George Kovacs demonstrates that SF's contemporary relevance is facilitated by the “historic and mythical past shared by both the fictional characters of the series and its viewers of the present” (Kovacs 2015, p. 200). Scholars from a variety of fields such as classical studies,

philosophy, history, religious studies, and media studies have noted the intertexts between the SF television series *Star Trek* and classical antiquity, particularly in the area of mythology (Tyrrell 2010; Littleton 2010; Wagner and Lundeen 1998; Wagner 1999; Keen 2007; Winkler 2009; Brown 2013; Kovacs 2015; Baker 2023; Blondell 2023).<sup>1</sup> “Universal mythical themes can be detected throughout the *Star Trek* canon, even in episodes that are not obviously ‘mythological’”, writes C. Scott Littleton, which, in turn, produces a “secularized mythology of the future” (Littleton 2010, pp. 44–45). *Star Trek*’s relationship with mythology is complex and multi-faceted. Not only does it incorporate mythological material from antiquity into its story world but it is also situated as a myth-making enterprise that combines old and new mythologies to influence its commercial reach: “*Star Trek* borrows the cultural legitimacy and longevity often associated with myth to suggest and reinforce its own longevity within popular culture”, writes media scholar Djoyimi Baker (2023, p. 7). This signals that humanity’s high-tech future is informed by its mythic past, reinforcing the timelessness of *Star Trek*, and also that it is a vehicle for exploring age-old definitions of humanity: what about humanity is constant and what changes over time and space?

Building on these ideas, this article draws parallels between ancient mythology and *Star Trek* to analyze how the series portrays the tensions between biological and artificial life, focused in this study on supercomputers, androids, and holograms. Entire ideologies, philosophies, and even in-world legal decisions have developed around artificial intelligence (AI) and affiliated technologies. Story arcs involving AI have evolved over time in ways that mirror humanity’s real-life and ever-changing relationship with advanced technologies. The creation of AI showcases the heights of human achievement as humanity takes on the role of creator to produce something that may exceed their intelligence, power, and lifespan. Through the process of becoming creators, humans are afforded qualities of the divine, and with that comes the potential for hubris and hunger for power but also fear of the loss of control over their creation. Invariably, humans come to feel threatened by an intelligent, powerful creation that they perceive will replace or destroy them. This narrative arc of human–artificial relationships frequently found in SF literature, film, and television is forecasted in sources from antiquity that describe the tensions between creator and created entity, such as Hesiod’s *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. However, as the product of advanced SF technology (often imaginary or coded as “magical” in some way), AI can present as ageless and immortal, which are characteristics of the immortal gods that fundamentally distinguish them from mortal humans, as seen in Homer’s *Odyssey* and the *Homeric Hymns*. Occasionally, *Star Trek*’s writers signal awareness of these storylines from myth, such as the *Short Treks* episode “Calypso”, which borrows from Homer’s *Odyssey*. However, I am primarily concerned with unpacking how even an unconscious borrowing of storylines and narratives from myth occurs in *Star Trek*. The themes and ideas from ancient mythology are so pervasive that they have influenced subsequent storytelling. When layered with common SF tropes, myths that unpack the nature of the divine and the process of human creation can be used to interrogate *Star Trek*’s complex relationship between organic and artificial life.

*Star Trek* is a vast media empire with 12 television series, 13 feature films, countless books and graphic novels, and both analog and video games. As a matter of focus, the current study will center primarily on the television series, with occasional references to film. We are presently living in a moment of resurgence for televised *Star Trek*, with four new *Trek* series airing concurrently: *Discovery* (Fuller and Kurtzman 2017–); *Lower Decks* (McMahan 2020–); *Prodigy* (Hageman and Hageman 2021–), which was recently picked up by Netflix; and *Strange New Worlds* (Goldsman et al. 2022–). *Star Trek: Picard* (Goldsman et al. 2020–2023) just completed its run to critical acclaim, sweeping the Saturn Awards with wins in Best Actor in a Television Series (Patrick Stewart), Best Supporting Actor (Jonathan Frakes), Best Supporting Actress (Jeri Ryan), and Best Science Fiction Television Series. Furthermore, an all-new original series has been announced called *Star Trek: Starfleet Academy* (Startrek.com Staff 2023), and a new Paramount+ movie, *Star Trek: Section 31*, is set to release in 2024. This paper aims to tie these threads together by analyzing

the series' treatment and approach to AI, from classic *Trek* to the new additions to the canon, many of which have yet to receive scholarly attention. Conversations about AI recapture and allude to classic *Trek* in-world storylines while also evolving the discussion about human–artificial relationships in SF more broadly and reflecting real-world responses to emergent technologies.

*Star Trek* is the product of creator Gene Roddenberry's vision of an idealized view of humanity's future. In *The Original Series* (Roddenberry 1966–1969), this manifests as a multi-racial, -ethnic, and -species crew working together to explore the stars, with curiosity about the cosmos and understanding of alien races. As a socially conscious television series, *Star Trek* responds to humanity's contemporary moment—such as the space race of the 1960s and NASA's manned moon landing of Apollo 11 in 1969—and projects it into an imagined future in the most optimistic terms (Asa 1999, p. 33; see generally Fern 1996). Narratives about the creation (and destruction) of AI are fertile ground to analyze what it means to be human and establish parameters for what is decidedly not human. The question of "What is human?" is a moving target subject to our contemporary moment. We can, in part, use the *Star Trek* series' incorporation of advanced technology like AI as a barometer for reading contemporary viewpoints about emergent technologies. Each new iteration of the series, responding to its own socio-cultural context and moment, brings with it a different and nuanced perspective of AI. Furthermore, in recognizing this process as a two-way street, *Star Trek's* imagined future technologies may in turn influence how the viewing audience responds to new technology in its own time.

Using the human–divine relationships of mythology as a framework can help us unpack the nature of artificial–organic life. The AI of *Star Trek* are created to be tools for their human creators. Like many technological beings across SF film and television, AI is built to have "superhuman capacities and strengths" that can manifest as "magical and divine", thus sharing many qualities with the gods of ancient mythology, and, "like the gods, they can be protective and helpful but also unpredictable, uncontrollable, and destructive" (Wentzel n.d., p. 1). The next sections will unpack the rich and complex traditions of both types of AI in *Star Trek*—protective and helpful AI on the one hand and uncontrollable and destructive AI on the other—and discuss how AI's apparent divine properties render it inherently separate, and even disqualified, from organic life.

## 2. Artificial Life in *Star Trek* as "Deathless and Ageless"

In discussions of the divine properties of the Greek gods, Albert Henrichs identifies immortality as "the ultimate benchmark of their divinity", alongside anthropomorphism and divine power (2010, p. 29). The gods' immortality is expressed as having a defined point of origin via birth or reproduction but an "exemption from death" or no defined endpoint (Henrichs 2010, p. 30). As Jenny Strauss Clay explains, many stories tell of the Olympians' birth but that, otherwise, they "remain forever fixed in the perfection of maturity" (Clay 1981–1982, p. 112). From as early as Homeric epic, the gods are considered "deathless and ageless" (ἄθάνατος καὶ ἀγήραος, Homer 1999, *Iliad* 8.539). The gods consume nectar and ambrosia, substances associated with divinity and a lack of aging (Clay 1981–1982, p. 115; Baratz 2015, pp. 160–63). In myth, the tension in human–divine relationships revolves around this essential difference in their nature—namely, that humans are mortal and the gods are immortal—which establishes a divide between the two that cannot be reconciled. As this section will demonstrate, the mortal–immortal divide can help unpack the tensions between human and artificial life throughout *Star Trek* and reflect common tropes from SF more broadly.

One illustration of the human–divine divide from myth comes from the cautionary tale of Eos and Tithonus from the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (2003). This is an embedded narrative told by Aphrodite addressing her mortal lover, Anchises, whose mortality prevents her from forming an emotional attachment to him. Eos, the immortal goddess of the dawn, takes a mortal lover in Tithonus and asks Zeus to grant him immortality. Although her wish is granted, Tithonus' corporeal form continues to wither and shrink with age, and

he slowly loses capacity of mind as he babbles incessantly. Unable to watch Tithonus in this state of degradation (and perhaps denying her role in the making of his condition), Eos ultimately locks him away (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 2003, lines 218–38). As a mortal, Tithonus is prevented from fully participating in immortality as the gods would experience it, despite a decree from Zeus and a diet of ambrosia, a substance which is tied to anti-aging, but may not directly cause the gods' immortality (Clay 1981–1982, pp. 115–16; Baratz 2015). This story, along with others that showcase the “flaws inherent in seeking immortality”, suggests that immortality is reserved for the gods alone and cannot easily be manufactured for non-divinities (Mayor 2018, p. 50; see also 53 ff.). Immortality separates gods from humans, suggesting that mortals and immortals cannot operate on an equal footing due to this essential difference in their natures.<sup>2</sup>

A number of examples of AI from *Star Trek* fit Henrichs' definition of divinity in that they have a fixed origin point (or a creation) and they display a sort of immortality afforded by advanced technology. They are designed to be tools whose skills surpass those of their creators and to live for a very long time, often well past the lifespans of their creators. A notable long-living AI from *Star Trek* is Lieutenant Commander Data (Brent Spiner), the android officer serving on the *USS Enterprise* in *The Next Generation* (Roddenberry 1987–1994). Data exhibits divine-like powers, such as super strength and incredibly fast computational processing speed that exceed the capabilities of any organic or cybernetic being. Although Data's physical outward appearance was programmed to simulate aging (*TNG*: “Inheritance”, 7.10),<sup>3</sup> Data does not succumb easily to injury due to his polyalloy skeletal infrastructure. Even after being decapitated while time traveling, his head is successfully reattached to his body 500 years in the future (*TNG*: “Time's Arrow”, 5.26 and “Time's Arrow, Part II”, 6.1). Data is also immune to external stressors that would affect organic life, like sleep deprivation, radiation, illness, and oxygen deprivation. As a result, Data often performs work that humans cannot do or find difficult, such as taking the night shift on the bridge (*TNG*: “Data's Day”, 4.11) and handling radioactive material (*TNG*: “Thine Own Self”, 7.16).

Similarly, the Doctor (Robert Picardo), the *USS Voyager's* Emergency Medical Hologram (EMH) from *Star Trek: Voyager* (Berman et al. 1995–2001), also presents with immortality and powerful abilities. As a hologram, his outward appearance remains the same unless changes are programmed into his holo-imaging. The Doctor's composition of “photons and force fields” (*VOY*: “Fairhaven”, 6.11) means he does not register as a lifeform to sensors and is often undetected by enemy incursions (*VOY*: “Basics, Part I”, 2.26; “Basics, Part II”, 3.1; “Displaced”, 3.24). He is also unaffected by illnesses or spatial anomalies, allowing him to perform tasks that biological life cannot (*VOY*: “Workforce, Part I”, 7.16; “Workforce, Part II”, 7.17), and his program can even be sent through subspace (*VOY*: “Message in a Bottle”, 4.14). Lacking a corporeal form, the Doctor does not feel pain, does not require food, and is impossible to injure—unless his program is compromised, as happens temporarily in “Latent Image” (*VOY* 5.11). Although in early seasons, the Doctor was confined to locations on the ship with holo-emitters, he eventually receives a mobile emitter that allows him to freely travel while wearing it (*VOY*: “Future's End”, 3.8; “Future's End, Part II”, 3.9). With this futuristic technology, he is able to leave sickbay and the ship on away missions, as in the episode “Blink of an Eye”, where he lived among organics on a planet for three years due to a time distortion (*VOY* 6.12).

One particularly stand-out example of *Star Trek's* technological immortality that can be aligned closely with that of the mythological Greek gods is Zora, the sentient ship's computer of the *USS Discovery* in the episode “Calypso” (*ST* 1.2, story by Michael Chabon and Sean Cochran).<sup>4</sup> *Short Treks* (Fuller and Kurtzman 2018–2020) is an anthology of mini-episodes created to be companions to the new *Star Trek* series, airing in 2017 to present, that showcase the wider world of the franchise and prefigure later storylines. The episode's title “Calypso” invites intertexts with the immortal goddess Calypso from Homer's *Odyssey* Book 5, where she rescues and imprisons the long-wandering mortal hero, Odysseus: “I vowed to make him deathless and ageless (ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀγήραον) for all days”, Calypso

says, using the immortal epithets of the gods for her mortal lover while he is on her shores (Homer 1995, *Odyssey* 5.136).

Zora (voiced by Annabelle Wallis) is a long-living AI and acousmatic computer, to borrow the terminology of Liz W. Faber in *The Computer's Voice: From Star Trek to Siri* (Faber 2020). Zora carries out the captain's orders, loyally maintaining *Discovery's* position for nearly one thousand years while the crew is away, casting her in the role of a helper and provider to humans. Zora is positioned within *Star Trek's* tradition of feminine-voiced ship's computers, which have previously been voiced almost exclusively by Majel Barrett, Roddenberry's spouse, when she first lent her voice to the *Enterprise* in *TOS*, and continuing throughout later series, feature films, games, and other software. In *TOS*, Faber observes that Barrett affects a robotic quality to her computer voice work, essentially conveying a "cold data machine" whose perceived femininity is "entirely nonthreatening" (Faber 2020, p. 45); in *TNG*, Barrett's tone evolves to be "warmer, softer, and less mechanical sounding" (p. 72).<sup>5</sup> *Star Trek's* ship's computer is no HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, dir. Stanley Kubrick), a masculine-voiced ship's computer that is characterized by a power struggle with the crew and that ultimately revolts and kills them.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of the ship's computer in *Star Trek*—both for the *Enterprise* and *Discovery*—is to assist the organic crew on their mission and take responsibility for their safety and mission success. This effectively casts the computer in the role of a "talking mother ship" (p. 57), whose omniscience and omnipresence make her appear as a technological divinity. However, as a caretaker, the ship simultaneously fills a service role often assigned to machines that present with female-gendered traits, reflecting "the cultural restrictions on and proscriptions for lived, gendered subject positions" (p. 84). This has contemporary resonances with the growing number of feminine-voiced personal assistant technologies like Apple's Siri, which "suggest stereotypical and archetypal constructions of femininity" (pp. 162–63) by placing even a feminine-coded machine in the role of a helper in personal and public spaces.

In *Star Trek*, Zora stands apart from her non-threatening, feminine-voiced, acousmatic predecessors through explorations of her agency and feminine sexuality that only work to magnify her perceived divinity. Like the episode's titular divine namesake, Zora aids a shipwrecked traveler, Craft (Aldis Hodge), whose name suggests Odysseus' Homeric attributes of craftiness and guile (like πολύτροπον, "of many turns", Homer 1995, *Odyssey* 1.1). Zora provides Craft with food, water, and entertainment, which she can manifest like magic with replicator technology, casting her as a helpful mother ship. But "Calypso" explores the ramifications of Zora acquiring sentience, which involve going beyond the role of a caring mother to a being with wants and desires. Even more so than Barrett's work in *TNG*, Wallis' Zora audibly affects a more conversational and human-sounding tone and cadence, making her indistinguishable from organic life. Additionally, as an expression of her emergent femininity, and like her Odyssean namesake, she develops romantic feelings for Craft. Zora also stands out from her predecessors in that she is an agent in her own development toward sentience, and even creates an image of herself as a hologram as she sees herself (played by Sash Striga in a non-speaking role). In doing so, she breaks the mold of the disembodied acousmatic computer by embodying herself. This disrupts the model of the acousmatic computer and amplifies her role as a being with divine properties, which she uses to create her own image, like a deity from myth taking on human form (like Aphrodite as a shepherdess in *Homeric Hymns* or Athena as Mentor in the *Odyssey*). Craft is intrigued by Zora and tempted to return her affections but ultimately remains loyal to his wife. In a display of compassion for his inner conflict, Zora provides Craft with passage home. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus also signals a preference for his mortal existence when he weeps daily and pines for Penelope, his mortal wife. About Penelope, he says to Calypso, "She is human, you are deathless, ageless; but even so, I want to go back home" (Homer 2017, trans. Wilson, p. 187). Although he lives in an ostensible paradise where everything is provided, Odysseus rejects this immortal existence in preference for his mortal life. Odysseus' choice establishes that there is a "sharp separation between mortality and divinity" (Segal 1992, p. 498). Similarly, Craft rejects an existence where everything

is provided for him (like tacos on Tuesday), valuing instead connection with humans and the allure of his home world which Zora, despite her divine-like power, cannot replicate. Whereas Calypso is forced by Zeus to release Odysseus, Zora releases Craft of her own free will, affirming her as a helpful AI being within the wider world of *Star Trek* but also as AI with compassion.

These three specific individuals—Data, the Doctor, and Zora—represent *Star Trek's* encounters with benevolent AI. Programmed to be helpers and tools for humanity, these friendly AI present as divine with their superhuman abilities that are used to assist humans. Although AI presents divine features like immortality, they are also manufactured entities and must contend with their creators: humans. As manufactured beings, AI creations are often “remarkably interested in becoming more human” themselves, and seek ways to participate in the “rights of autonomy and self-determination that humans enjoy” (Getman 2023, p. 116). For certain AI beings, it is their very interest in participating in humanity that makes them non-threatening to humans. The next section is concerned with exploring how AI's role as a simulacrum or imitation of humanity undermines its quest for personhood and how mythological narratives of manufactured beings also reflect this tension.

### 3. Made to Imitate: The Limits of AI's Personhood

Data, the Doctor, and Zora are *Star Trek's* benevolent AI who approach humanity through the imitation of humans: they are created to look and/or sound human, making them simulacra of humanity, and, when left to their own devices, they explore activities that are arguably core to the human experience, like the creative arts and social connection. Although artificial life forms participate in human hobbies and activities, their status as imitators renders them “incomplete human simulacra”, subjugating them as outsiders to the complete human experience (Getman 2023, p. 118; see also Wentzel n.d., pp. 3–4). In an added layer of tension, philosopher Rebecca Raphael sees artificial life in SF as “unavoidably a simulation of organic life” whose very existence threatens to erase the original. So, although the simulacrum presents with hyper-abilities (super strength, super speed), it is treated throughout SF as a “disqualified human” (a trope of disability) and barred from participating in the work of “real” humans (Raphael 2015, p. 179). Thus, the personhood of AI is constantly questioned as it is often only measured relative to humanity, and rarely on its own terms. To seek out this tension between imitation and emergent personhood, we can turn to the example of Pygmalion's statue from classical myth.<sup>7</sup> Showcasing AI as striving to participate in certain aspects of humanity (art, music, creativity, and empathy) can ultimately “provoke reflection on what it means to be human” (Weiss 2016, p. 182). Thus, through its AI, *Star Trek* highlights its own prioritization of what it means to be human—participation in hobbies that signal privilege and prioritize whiteness and the products associated with “Western” culture.

The holographic Doctor is an excellent example of *Star Trek's* AI simulacrum as he was created in the image of his programmer Dr. Lewis Zimmerman—complete with a cranky disposition and receding hairline. Robert Picardo plays both human and hologram roles, which maintains the illusion of a very thin divide between creator and created entity; elsewhere, the relationship between the Doctor and Dr. Zimmerman is referred to in terms of a father–son relationship (VOY: “Author, Author”, 7.19). The Doctor seeks to participate in the human experience, like when he programs a holographic family for himself as a way to expand his personal subroutines. However, since the family is artificial, he can suspend the program at any time and break the illusion, resulting in a sort of failure in his attempt to imitate humans; as an artificial being, he perhaps has an artificial understanding of the interactions that define humanity for *Star Trek* (VOY: “Real Life”, 3.22).

As a simulacrum, the Doctor frequently imitates humanity through participation in the creative arts, particularly singing opera. The Doctor and his operatic talents are initially adored by an alien race the crew encounter, but the aliens eventually grow tired of the limits of his vocal cords and replace him with an AI they create in the Doctor's

image, effectively creating a simulacrum of a simulacrum (VOY: “Virtuoso”, 6.13). Music occupies an important role in *Star Trek* as many characters play an instrument as a hobby: Commander William Riker (Jonathan Frakes) plays the trombone and loves jazz music and Ensign Harry Kim (Garrett Wang) plays the clarinet and saxophone. Additionally, *Strange New Worlds* frequently incorporates music into its storytelling, like when Lieutenant Nyota Uhura (Celia Rose Gooding) uses music theory to communicate with an alien asteroid (“Children of the Comet”, 1.2) and when the crew encounters a singularity that leads them to express their emotions in song, highlighting the actors’ singing abilities (“Subspace Rhapsody”, 2.9). Similarly, the Doctor’s interest in musicmaking signals his desire to participate in an activity that is core to *Star Trek*’s definition of human excellence, but with a preference for the “high art” of classical opera and the “Western classical canon of great white men” (Getman 2023, p. 119). This signals that AI in *Star Trek* is striving to imitate aspects of privileged white culture, which has been established as the benchmark for human achievement. This is a trend that we see continue with other AI, which will be explored with Zora. By the end of the series, the Doctor embraces being a hologram, happy with his superhuman ability to multitask, among other things. When speaking to Captain Janeway (Kate Mulgrew), he remarks, “There was a time when I would have given anything to be flesh and blood. But I’ve come to realize that being a hologram is far superior . . . no offense” (VOY: “The Renaissance Man”, 7.23). Thus, the Doctor’s character arc ends with a rejection of his identity as a mere simulacrum as he embraces his selfhood as an artificial being. He begins to evaluate himself outside the framework of humanity.

Returning to the acousmatic ship’s computer in *Short Treks*’s “Calypso” (ST 1.2), we also see the importance of imitation in the way Zora processes the world around her. Zora’s isolation from humanity leaves her to comprehend romance by imitating media in her database. Initially unfamiliar with how to process her feelings for her human passenger, Craft, Zora mediates her feelings through the lens of the romantic musical film *Funny Face* (dir. Stanley Donen 1957), where a young woman (played by Audrey Hepburn) is given a makeover to become a fashion model by Fred Astaire’s character and they fall in love. Zora expresses her feelings for Craft through a re-enactment of the film’s climactic dancing scene to the George Gershwin song, “S Wonderful”. In order to dance with Craft, Zora creates a holographic projection of herself, initially appearing as a simulacrum of Hepburn, the film’s heroine. But Craft prompts Zora to reject the visage of Hepburn and adopt a holographic image that she feels best represents her. When she manifests her holographic avatar, she still wears the same wedding gown and veil as Hepburn does in the film, signaling her continued reliance on the source material for comprehending her identity.

The film *Funny Face* is a retelling of the ancient myth of Pygmalion, perhaps best known from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where an artist sculpts an ideal woman, falls in love with her, and she is made real by Aphrodite (10.243–297). The intertextual engagement with the Pygmalion myth is particularly apt in this case because it interrogates the viewpoint that a creator/artist has for a manufactured simulacrum, which can be fruitfully applied to the dynamic between artificial beings and their organic creators. In particular, the Pygmalion myth is often utilized as a framework in SF to explore how machines and artificial life are connected to romance, sex, and expressions of female gender (James 2011; Raphael 2015; Wosk 2015; Keen 2017; Wentzel n.d.). In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1984), Pygmalion rejects the women of his city for what he perceives as their lax morals and instead sculpts a statue of his ideal woman, called an “ivory maiden” (“*eburnea virgo*”, 10.275), but it is never named. The statue’s role as an imitation is foregrounded in the text. Pygmalion becomes infatuated with the statue and burns for the “man-made flesh” (“*simulati corporis*”, 10.253); later, it is called a “statue of his girlfriend” (“*simulacra suae . . . puellae*”, 10.280).<sup>8</sup> Although Pygmalion realizes the statue is not real, he gives it gifts, talks to it, and sleeps with it, and thus endows it with “fictive life” and “willfully sustains his fantasy” (Raphael 2015, p. 185). Only by the intervention of the all-powerful Aphrodite is the statue made into a real body that is gendered feminine, and that can be sensed and can herself perform the act of sensing.

Although Zora is technically an artificial creation and simulates fragments of humanity that she can glean from her database, in her story, she plays both the role of simulacrum and of the entity that endows herself with life. She is the agent in her own making by exploring her own sentience in the long absence of her creators, which may be an essential part of her freedom to explore herself. Zora also names herself, which is something not afforded to Pygmalion's nameless statue, even after she is turned real. Although designed to be acousmatic, Zora embodies herself holographically by manifesting her own image as she sees herself, though this act of agency is arguably undermined by being at the encouragement of a male character. Nevertheless, in this way, she breaks the mold of Pygmalion's ivory statue through assertions of her own agency and role in the animating of herself. The episode's invocation of *Funny Face* to explore Zora's interactions with humanity situates her in a growing tradition of manufactured maidens on screen—*Metropolis* (1927), *Stepford Wives* (1975; remake 2004), *Her* (2013), and *Ex Machina* (2014)—to name a few. As with a number of these examples, the growing personhood and agency of manufactured maidens is viewed as a threat (to men, to humanity), but Zora's role as a benevolent helper AI and maternal caretaker neutralizes this threat.<sup>9</sup>

Taken together, the examples enumerated above of manufactured maidens on screen also point to the alignment of AI with whiteness and white femininity in particular. The predominant trend casts white or white-presenting (and sounding) actors in the role of AI on screen—including *Star Trek's* male and female AI. This has troubling ramifications for the public perception of advanced technology. For the manufactured maidens often connected with sex and romance, it suggests that if one is to build an ideal woman, she resides in a white body or is associated with whiteness. This tantalizingly aligns with Ovid's "ivory maiden" ("*eburnea virgo*", 10.275), whose existence is reduced to the materials used to construct her. The emphasis on the statue's white marble body foregrounds the innocence and sexual purity associated with the ideal Roman woman and connects to contemporary associations with ancient Greece and Rome as a locus of idealized "Western" culture. The alignment of AI and whiteness in screen media reinforces real-world ethical concerns about inherent racism in the field of robotics technology, from the lack of diversity among the people creating the technology (Metz 2021) to the racism and sexism embedded in the data sets used to train AI (O'Neil 2016) and the racial coding of anthropomorphic robots as white (Sparrow 2020). This communicates that bias is inherent in the processes of creating advanced technology and that advanced technology is made for and in the image of white people; people of color are barred from participating in and benefitting from humanity's advancements. If we are to view technology as having divine properties, as I argue *Star Trek* invites us to do, and the technology is often coded as white, then it stands to reason that technological divinity and immortality are also inherently white. The lack of diversity in the real-world construction of robots and advanced AI contrasts to some degree with *Star Trek's* regular casting of people of color in the role of engineers and creators who regularly interface with AI: Dr. Richard Daystrom in *TOS* (William Marshall), whose name is used in the Federation's prominent research center, the Daystrom Institute; in *TNG*, Geordi La Forge (LeVar Burton) regularly works on Data's positronic brain and helps with his system's updates; and in *VOY*, B'Elanna Torres (Roxann Dawson) is a part-Klingon, part-human engineer who supports the Doctor's holographic matrix and even dabbles in her own AI projects. Despite the gains in the representation of creators, manifestations of racism and bias are regularly explored in narratives of AI in *Star Trek*, particularly about the personhood of the Doctor and Data, as we will see.

Turning back to the complexities of AI, imitation, and personhood, the android Data is an excellent test subject for AI's exploration of humanity. Comically referred to as "the robot who teaches the course in humanities" by the alien Q (*TNG*: "Deja Q", 3.13), Data professes to be afflicted with a sort of Pinocchio syndrome: "I have often wished to be human. I study people carefully in order to more closely approximate human behavior". He admits to imitating humans in an effort to be more like them, and yet, at the same time, he recognizes his own alterity when he says, "I am an android. That will never



change" (*TNG*: "Hero Worship", 5.11). A major point of separation between Data and his aspirations for humanity is his inability to feel emotion. Mimicking human behavior allows him to approach being human, as when Data imitates human affectations to learn humor through a stand-up holodeck program (*TNG*: "The Outrageous Okona", 2.4). For Data, humanity is an achievement to be reached (Weiss 2016, p. 182). Like the Doctor, Data's hobbies involve creative endeavors, like painting, acting, poetry, and musical performance. But humans around him tend to point out when his art lacks a spark of personality, like his over-adherence to rhyme and meter in "Ode to Spot" (*TNG*: "Schisms", 6.5), or that he should use his own performance to discover how to play King Henry, "not through imitating" other actors (*TNG*: "The Defector", 3.10). These are constant reminders of Data's status as the "incomplete human simulacra". Similarly, Raphael has argued that Data's inability to process emotions further marks him as having a "disqualifying disability" that "underlines the major role of ability in defining humanity" (Raphael 2015, p. 195), and, here, the ability to feel emotion and experience sympathy is *Star Trek*'s pinnacle human achievement. Data pursues a romantic relationship with a fellow crewperson, through which he studies romance and acts like a stereotypical lover in a relationship to compensate for his lack of emotions. His romantic partner ultimately realizes their relationship will always be one-sided because Data is imitating, not actually feeling, emotion (*TNG*: "In Theory", 4.25). Data's lack of emotional capacity is ultimately resolved when an emotion chip is installed in him in the film *Star Trek Generations* (1994, dir. David Carson); later, *Star Trek: Picard* season 3 explores a sort of new composite AI of Data's former selves who can feel and express emotion. AI is generally limited to how it is programmed, but, in special cases, AI can exceed its programming, particularly through the creative arts and pursuing social-emotional attachments. This establishes that *Star Trek* values these aspects of humanity as the very things by which anyone striving to be human should be measured. However, a major question still remains: whether AI is truly creating or simply imitating human behavior and creativity. Even if AI can effectively imitate humans and even perform tasks *better* than humans, it is often still viewed as something *other* than human.

Some AI beings operate within close proximity to humans and therefore are not viewed as a threat to humanity: they follow their programming, help humans, and act as tools with very specific tasks to perform. Despite all that these AI creations do for humanity, they are themselves not considered "people". Raphael demonstrates that this is a trope prevalent in SF narratives (like Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and the 1982 film adaptation *Blade Runner* directed by Ridley Scott) and can lead to the enslavement of AI. This relegates AI to the roles of "certain types of labor, especially martial and sex work", seeking to "separate 'real' humans from these types of work" (Raphael 2015, p. 179). This very idea is explored, along with Data's personhood, in the iconic courtroom drama, "The Measure of a Man" (*TNG* 2.9), in which a trial is held to determine if Starfleet can compel Data to submit to an invasive procedure to examine his positronic brain and thereby build more androids. There is an assumption that because Data is created by humans, humans retain control over his body and life trajectory. In a pivotal scene in this episode, alien bartender Guinan (Whoopi Goldberg) advises Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) that the impetus for creating more artificial life to be "disposable creatures" is akin to slavery: "An army of Datas, all disposable, you don't have to think about their welfare, you don't think about how they feel. Whole generations of disposable people". After a compelling testimony by Picard who plays the role of Data's defense attorney, the judge rules that Data is not Starfleet property and cannot be forced to undergo the life-threatening procedure. With Guinan's speech in mind, determining that Data is not Starfleet property is aligned for the viewers to anti-slavery and indicates protection of all life, which is a powerful social message put into the mouth of a prominent Black actor. While some scholars interpret this ruling to expand the definition of personhood from humans to cover "many other conceivable lifeforms, even artificial ones" (Rosenstand 2016, p. 174), this is never clearly established. In fact, magistrate Phillipa Louvois (Amanda McBroom) is not willing to rule that Data is sentient, saying that it is a question "best left to saints and

philosophers.”<sup>10</sup> This leaves a gap between the audience’s continued understanding that Data is a person—a theme that is frequently signaled throughout *TNG*—and the limitations of this in-world legal system to promote equity.

“The Measure of a Man” leaves the issue of AI’s personhood open and ripe for revisiting. The holographic Doctor’s personhood is put on trial in “Author, Author” (*VOY* 7.19) as he fights a publisher who claims the rights to a holo-novel the Doctor wrote, citing that he is not a person under Federation law. The arbiter of the case extends the definition of artist to include the Doctor, thereby granting him control of his artistic products. In his ruling, the arbiter states, “The Doctor exhibits many of the traits we associate with a person. Intelligence, creativity, ambition, even fallibility. But are these traits real, or is the Doctor merely programmed to simulate them? To be honest, I don’t know”. The issue of imitation arises again in this ruling as a sort of measuring rod for the sentience of a programmed machine. Similar to Data’s trial, the arbiter here is “not prepared” to rule that the Doctor is a person under the law. *Star Trek* stops short of granting AI personhood and thereby admitting that a mechanical entity could have equal rights to humanity. This is particularly salient considering how much Starfleet grants rights to other questionably sentient beings and treats them with respect, from space jellyfish (*TNG*: “Encounter at Far Point”, 1.1–1.2) to photonic life forms (*VOY*: “Bride of Chaotica!”, 5.12) and disembodied consciousness in a nebula (*SNW*: “The Elysian Kingdom”, 1.8). The small victories from these trials, by taking baby steps toward the rights of AI in *Star Trek*, “continue the franchise’s perceived progressive work while simultaneously letting the members of its audience—especially its white, middle-class audience—feel good about the social progress it has achieved” (Getman 2023, p. 123). This undermines the progressive morals extolled as being part of the fabric of *Star Trek*’s idealist future. Or perhaps the point here is that, even in a utopian future, it is difficult to change ideologies and systemic bias—something that would resonate deeply with its contemporary audience. The continued disagreements about the sentience and personhood of *Star Trek*’s AI are magnified when we think about the dynamics of created entity and creator from myth and other SF frameworks.

#### 4. The Dangers of Technological Divinity

The denial of personhood rights for AI in *Star Trek* occurs so frequently that it speaks to the deep-seated distrust and fear that humans have of artificial life, perhaps stemming from a fear of being superseded or replaced by their own creations. This is particularly true for examples of AI in classic *Star Trek*, going back to *The Original Series*. Investigating these early examples reveals much more skepticism in storylines about AI and the threats, real or imagined, that they pose to humanity. This reinforces reading *Star Trek*’s AI as associated with dangerous divine powers.

In “The Return of the Archons” (*TOS* 1.21), the planet Beta III has developed a culture with cult-like reverence around a mysterious leader, Landru, who is revealed to be a 6000-year-old supercomputer. Landru had once been a human who programmed this computer to maintain a peaceful existence for humans, but the computer outlived him, adopted its maker’s identity, and has been masquerading as a human leader via holographic projection. Although Landru is seemingly an intelligent being, Captain James Kirk (William Shatner) denies the AI rights of personhood: “[Landru the human] may have programmed you, but he could not have given you a soul”, Kirk says to the computer. He implies that Landru could not possibly have a soul because “you are a machine”, drawing a line in the sand between AI and humanity. Kirk convinces Landru to self-identify as the cause of the planet’s cultural stagnation and, following its imperative to protect the planet, Landru self-destructs. According to George Kovacs, *Star Trek* usually narrates that “technological and scientific development form the imperative of a healthy society” (Kovacs 2015, p. 209). This episode, and others that feature AI beings presenting as immortal deities, represent a departure from that mindset and instead acknowledge that technology can be the source of stagnation. Similarly, the AI known as NOMAD in “The Changeling” (*TOS* 2.3) is another intelligent machine that attempts to take over humanity and must be dismantled. In “The

Ultimate Computer" (*TOS* 2.24), the crew explores whether the M-5 supercomputer could automate the actions of a starship, its crew, and its captain: navigational maneuvers, contact problems, and war-game attack simulations. The skepticism of Kirk and Dr. Leonard McCoy (DeForest Kelley) that humans can be replaced with "mindless machines" is proven justified when the crew and computer's creator lose control of the M-5 and it kills crew members from another ship, claiming a threat to its existence: "this unit must survive", the M-5 repeats. The M-5 self-destructs when Kirk makes it face the crimes it committed, essentially causing the computer to bring justice against itself for murder. The computer's desire to live and to lash out when it feels threatened is a sign of intelligent life that is seen elsewhere throughout *Star Trek* and which is prominent in other SF narratives of malevolent ship's computers, like HAL from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, dir. Stanley Kubrick), which was released a mere month after "The Ultimate Computer" first aired.

The threat of a machine takeover of humans and humankind's resistance to losing their place in society to machines are the driving forces behind "The Return of the Archons" and "The Ultimate Computer". Like Landru, the M-5 is thought to lack the qualities that define humanity and is therefore inferior and cannot replace the work of humans—at least not in the context of running a starship and facing life-and-death scenarios. These examples highlight that human achievement cannot be replicated by artificial means. These storylines involving the take-down of AI convey that humanity's spark is a rarity that must be preserved and cultivated and are connected to a very American notion that freedom is the source of good in society: "Without freedom of choice, there is no creativity; without creativity, there is no life", Kirk says to Landru in their battle of wits. A machine's programming cannot replicate certain human values, as Kirk shows that Landru's creator "couldn't give it [Landru] his wisdom, his compassion, his understanding, his soul" (*TOS*: "The Return of the Archons", 1.21). Again, we see how human compassion and creativity are treated as the benchmark of life, which brings us back to the themes apparent in discussing the Doctor and Data.

The alignment between AI and the gods of mythology is made literal when the technology is treated as a god, sometimes even worshiped by planet inhabitants, as happens with Landru and also Vaal, another self-aware computer that controls an entire planet's weather patterns and is revered by the native humanoid inhabitants (*TOS*: "The Apple", 2.5). Advanced AI, whose technical knowledge surpasses that of humanoid planetary inhabitants, becomes integrated into the planet's larger mytho-religious system and shapes its development—often for the worse. *Star Trek* crews display "disdain for superstition, for the interpretation of more advanced technology in what are considered to be fundamentally irrational terms" (McGrath 2015, p. 482). These pseudo-religious systems are deemed false and ultimately destroyed, even if it involves breaking the Prime Directive, which is Starfleet's law of non-interference with pre-warp civilizations. "The Return of the Archons" has been interpreted as an example of *Star Trek*'s take-down of religion. Kirk and the crew liberate humans from the false god Landru, suggesting that religion (even an organized one run by a computer) is only an illusion (Linford 1999, p. 85). A number of episodes from *The Original Series* also fit this mold of debunking apparent gods, including "Who Mourns for Adonais?" (*TOS* 2.2), where the alien Apollo's proclaimed godhood is denied by the crew and he succumbs to a sort of vanishing death. In *The Next Generation* episode "Who Watches the Watchers?" (3.4), Picard must convince a developing civilization not to worship him as a god (whom they refer to as "the Picard"); in "Devil's Due" (*TNG* 4.13), Picard debunks a con artist holding an entire planet hostage by masquerading as a deity with the use of her ship's advanced technology. According to James F. McGrath, *Star Trek* is well known for its "lack of explicit religiosity" (McGrath 2015, p. 472),<sup>11</sup> and yet, despite this absence and its apparent secularized society, *Star Trek* (particularly *TOS*-era) "can't seem to leave religion alone" (Asa 1999, p. 51). *Star Trek* returns time and time again to the divine, even if it means tearing down the idea of divinity. This sends the message that religious belief can be dangerous because the gods themselves are questionable: they may be powerful, malevolent aliens taking advantage of a less developed civilization or

superior technology that appears god-like. In most cases, the gods are false and need to be debunked. In lieu of religion, *Star Trek* extols human achievement in a futuristic secular humanist society marked by progress (Asa 1999, p. 47; see also McGrath 2016).

In considering how ingrained and essential these narratives are to *Star Trek*, we can turn to parody. *Lower Decks*, a new animated addition to the *Star Trek* canon, often serves as a repository of fast-paced references to and deep-cuts of other *Trek* series for the well-informed viewer. It reinforces tropes from across the canon but also subverts them, as with its parody of the evil supercomputer trope through AGIMUS (voiced by long-time *Star Trek* guest actor Jeffrey Combs). AGIMUS is a sentient “manipulative supercomputer who controlled a planet”, as this exchange between the planet leader and Captain Carol Freeman (Dawnn Lewis) details:

PLANET LEADER: A hundred-year war, all because a computer tricked us into fighting each other. It’s so embarrassing!

FREEMAN: A lot of civilizations blame it on the supernatural. At least you didn’t fall for that!

PLANET LEADER: Yeah, that would have been crazy.

The leader’s final line is played for laughs, delivered hesitantly in front of a mural of the planet’s inhabitants kneeling in worship before AGIMUS, which pokes fun at the malevolent-AI-as-god trope. By the end of the episode, AGIMUS is captured and brought to a special facility at the Daystrom Institute where a wall of cells houses imprisoned evil supercomputers (*LD*: “Where Pleasant Fountains Lie”, 2.7). As the view pans out to a wall filled with supercomputers, *Star Trek* shows that it can provide an unending supply of supercomputers whose stories we may never need to learn; if you know the story of one megalomaniacal computer, you know them all—or so we think. The writers of *Lower Decks* return to AGIMUS after he escapes the Daystrom penitentiary to take over a planet but finds no joy in the act of domination without his friend and fellow AI, Peanut Hamper (voiced by Kether Donohue): “I didn’t want to subjugate a planet again”, AGIMUS says, and willingly returns to Daystrom to “process my toxic behavior” (*LD*: “A Few Badgeys More”, 4.7). In the extended *Trek* universe, there is room even for the rehabilitation of evil supercomputers, particularly when they adopt acceptable human behaviors such as relationship building, self-assessment, and compassion. Through comedy, *Lower Decks* lives up to the idealism of *Star Trek*’s founding principles—a trend that we see repeated in more of the later additions to the canon.

We have seen that a large divide problematizes the relationship between humans and artificial life. AI in *Star Trek* presents as immortal, which places it at odds with its mortal, human creators. This tension becomes even more pronounced when *Star Trek* features malevolent AI beings that present actual harm to humans and may even come to be worshipped themselves as divinities. Even the benevolent AI creations are prevented from being defined as persons, which reveals how deep-seated humanity’s fear of machines really is. This tension between human and artificial life is revisited throughout the *Trek* canon, from *The Original Series* (1966–1969) through the canon’s latest installment of *Star Trek: Picard* (2020–2023), which we turn to in the next section.

## 5. Tech Generational Warfare: Resonances of Hesiod

“The dance of division and replication. Imperfect. Finite. Organic life evolves, yearns for perfection. That yearning leads to synthetic life. But organics perceive this perfection as a threat. When they realize that their creations do not age, or become sick, or die . . . they will seek to destroy them, and in so doing, destroy themselves. Beyond the boundaries of time and space, we stand. An alliance of synthetic life, watching you, waiting for your signal. Call us, and we will come. You will have our protection. Your evolution will be their extinction.”

-The Admonition, “Et in Arcadia Ego, Part 1”, *Star Trek: Picard* 1.9. Dir. Akiva Goldsman.

So far, we have seen that storylines featuring AI in *Star Trek* focus on how artificial life threatens to replace the work of humans or surpass human achievement. *Star Trek: Picard* imagines the worst outcome in this dynamic where AI threatens to destroy organic life. This is indicative of a pattern of divine generational upheaval that can be traced back to early ancient creation myths like the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* and the rise of the Hurrian and Hittite deity Kumarbi. Hesiod's *Theogony* adopts these narrative patterns imported from wider Mesopotamian mythos to tell a similar story "exceptional in Greek myth" of the violent transference of power between generations of Greek gods, from Ouranos to Kronos to Zeus (Henrichs 2010, p. 36). I argue that the framework provided by ancient succession myths can be fruitfully applied to explain the motivations of tensions between organic life and the AI it created. *Star Trek: Picard* treats AI's eventual supplanting of organic life as an inevitability that is motivated by a struggle for dominance and an imperative for survival in the face of destruction, which are key aspects of the ancient succession myths.

*Star Trek: Picard* sees the much-anticipated return of Patrick Stewart as Jean-Luc Picard, but his character is much altered from his last screen appearance. Season 1 is set 20 years after the events of the film *Star Trek: Nemesis* (dir. Stuart Baird 2002), in which Data sacrifices himself to save the *Enterprise*, an event that leaves Picard haunted. Additionally, after an attack on the Utopia Planitia shipyard, seemingly perpetrated by synthetic worker drones, that sabotaged the already-controversial evacuation efforts for the planet Romulus, the Federation banned synthetic life: "all active units are dismantled. And all research is halted" (PIC: "The End is the Beginning", 1.3). As a result, Picard resigns his Starfleet commission.<sup>12</sup> The ramifications of the synthetic ban are widespread, from the defunding of cybernetics research, some of which could cure diseases and prolong human life, like the life of Thaddeus Troi-Riker (PIC: "Nepenthe", 1.7), to the black-market creation of a new race of synthetics by cyberneticists Dr. Bruce Maddox (John Ales) and Dr. Altan Inigo Soong (Brent Spiner). When Picard encounters Dahj and Soji (both played by Isa Briones), synthetic beings created from one of Data's positronic neurons, he is drawn into the hope that, in the words of *Picard* showrunner Michael Chabon, "some form of Data . . . some element or some essence of Data is out there somewhere" (Story Log: "Broken Pieces" (Story Log 2023)). Picard and his makeshift crew locate and try to protect an entire race of synthetics on the planet Coppelius who are being hunted by a super-secret Romulan sect, the Zhat Vash, which has a "deep, unassuageable loathing" for all artificial life (PIC: "Maps and Legends", 1.2).

The series has been viewed as a significant departure from TNG-era *Trek* by design—detectible in its format of 10 episodes per season (versus the prior standard 25 or 26), a longer run-time per episode, and the highly produced, cinematic quality of each episode. Starfleet, which is "gripped by fear" and that has "lost sight of its highest ideals", may be unrecognizable to fans of the "comforting, quasi-utopia of TNG" (Vary 2020). *Picard* also rewrites *Star Trek's* idyllic past in its approach to artificial life by deliberately undermining earlier (albeit small) strides toward recognizing the personhood of AI through Data and the Doctor. *Picard* leans into the more skeptical treatment of AI that was much more common in *The Original Series*. Artificial life is no longer seen as worthy of protection; its personhood is completely denied without question in the creation of a workforce of synthetic "slaves"<sup>13</sup>—the very outcome Guinan warned against in "The Measure of a Man". Within this new, pessimistic landscape in which *Picard* is set—where Data, humanity's most advanced and marvelous android, is dead, and the iconic Starfleet admiral, Picard, has abandoned his commission—we revisit the conditions of human–artificial relationships. *Picard* attempts to recontextualize this tension between artificial and organic life to be more fitting for our contemporary moment of the 2020s, in which polarizing ideologies dominate our political landscape and fast-paced advancements in technology seemingly threaten to undermine human achievement.

*Picard* showcases the textured tension between organic and artificial life in "The Admonition", quoted above. The Admonition, as it is called by the Zhat Vash, is a message that comprises a spoken narrative overlaying a quick succession of violent technological

and biological imagery. The message was left by higher-dimensional synthetic beings as a show of support for fellow artificial life in the galaxy encountering hostility from its organic creators. According to the message's authors, artificial life is the natural consequence of organic evolution, the embodiment of "perfection" that improves upon the condition of biological life in that it does not age or pass away. As part of the logical "evolution" of artificial life, there is a period of strife where organic creators "seek to destroy" their artificial creations and thereby will "destroy themselves" when this powerful alliance of artificial life will defend its fellow AI. Hostility as a natural outcome of organic–synthetic relationships is a common SF trope and has even been played out within the *Trek* canon on a smaller scale in the *Voyager* episode "Prototype" (2.13), where chief engineer B'Elanna Torres helps a race of sentient robots self-replicate, only to learn that the robots "terminated" their organic creators and, with her help, now have the upper-hand in a long-standing robotics war. As made easy by the episodic format, the *Voyager* crew simply walks away from this confrontation that encapsulates so many common issues we have seen throughout *Star Trek's* portrait of AI: the use of artificial life as servants or tools by organics; organic life's fear of AI's nascent autonomy; the continuation of the maker's biases and agendas in the artificial beings it creates; and fear of the destruction of organics by AI.

*Picard* comes to confront the issues at play here between artificial and organic hostilities, particularly with the idea of higher-dimensional synthetic beings forming a coalition—a sort of unknowable shadow Federation—to legitimize the livelihood of AI. AI in *Star Trek* and science fiction more broadly has been coded with qualities of the divine; now, a super-group of omnipotent AIs existing "beyond the boundaries of time and space" makes the connection between AI and divinity much more explicit. When they are summoned by Soji and the synthetics on Coppelius, we catch a glimpse of the higher-dimensional synthetics through a dimensional rift: not at all humanoid, they reach through the rift with mechanical tentacles, evoking the summoning of the mysterious and powerful Great Old Ones of Lovecraftian fiction and further fomenting their status as divine entities. The Admonition, then, serves as both a message of support for artificial life from artificial divinities and serves as a threat to organic life by those divine technological powers. Once organic life tries to limit the position, power, and very lives of artificial beings, mutual distrust and fear develop between the two, demonstrating a universal imperative for survival. The Admonition plays with the trope rampant in *Star Trek* and SF of the ontological tensions between human/mortal and artificial/immortal. Humans and machines cannot truly see eye-to-eye because they are different on a fundamental level.

One mythological framework for conflict between old and new generations can be found in Hesiod's *Theogony* in the wars that occur in the divine transference of power. Fear dominates the exchange of power even among the gods, which itself represents a transfer of hierarchical power structures. Ouranos, the early personified deity of the heavens, hates his own "most terrible children . . . from the beginning" (Hesiod 2018: δεινότατοι παίδων, σφετέρω δ' ἤχθοντο τοκῆι | ἐξ ἀρχῆς, *Theogony* 155–156) and prevents them from being released from Gaia's womb; he is castrated and overthrown by his son, the Titan Kronos (126–187). Similarly, when Kronos becomes the reigning sky deity, and mindful of the previous generation as an example, he swallows his children to ensure "no one else from among the honorable progeny of Ouranos should have the honor of kingship among the immortals" besides himself (Hesiod 2018: ἵνα μή τις ἀγαυῶν Οὐραניῶνων | ἄλλος ἐν ἀθανάτοισιν ἔχοι βασιληίδα τιμήν, 461–462). Kronos is then overthrown by his son Zeus in a great battle called the Titanomachy and imprisoned in Tartarus (453–506). Finally, even Zeus, "advised by Gaia and starry Ouranos" (Γαίης φραδμοσύνησι καὶ Οὐρανοῦ ἀστερόεντος, 891), fears the threat of being supplanted by Metis' "very wise children" (περίφρονα τέκνα, 894) and so he swallows Metis while pregnant with Athena in an effort to absorb Metis's and Athena's power for his own and prevent the birth of a son whose power would have matched his own (886–900). Zeus will eventually give birth to Athena from his head as a sort of perversion of the act of birth typically reserved for

the biological female sex, but the threat of Athena or a future child supplanting him is seemingly neutralized through this act of consumption.

This recurring motif of generational upheaval in Hesiod can be interpreted as symbolic of the regular transference of power in ancient societies between previous and upcoming generations of leaders that may have involved hostility and are perhaps also indicative of the everyday tensions within society between the values held by the older and younger generations. Fear and hatred play an integral role in setting up the hostile transference of power, which aligns with how the Admonition presages the inevitability of war between organics and artificial life, which represents the new generation set to overtake their parent creators. Another relevant thematic element present in Hesiod's tale is the role of previous generations in instilling doubt and fear in later generations about the possibility of their own supplanting, perpetuating the cycle of hostility. The Admonition does this as well for both groups. The message of the Admonition comes from the higher-dimensional synthetics, who seem to speak from their own experiences with hostile organic life and sow that doubt in the race of synthetics on Coppelius as they poise themselves for war with the organics. Additionally, the generational element comes into play for the Romulan members of the Zhat Vash, which is a very old secret society formed around maintaining the secret of the Admonition that is often passed on within families for generations. This generational knowledge acts as a conduit for a shared mythology that develops around the hatred of synthetics. This affirms how the cyclical power of storytelling and manipulation of the ancient past can seed long-held beliefs, like fear and doubt, into newer generations.

*Picard* pivots from the inevitable hostility within the Hesiodic generational succession narrative, exploring instead how to break the cycle. What if war gave way to trust and compassion? The finale (*PIC: "Et in Arcadia Ego, Part II"*, 1.10) builds to a confrontation between the Romulan armada tasked to destroy the synth planet and the Federation fleet summoned to protect them. But, the anticipated battle does not occur. Rather, Picard convinces Soji and the synthetics to trust humans and close the rift in space-time to block the higher-dimensional, tentacled synthetics from entering their galaxy, and the Romulans retreat. Instead of promoting violence, the climax boils down to a philosophical decision about the nature of trust, allowing others the right to choose, and valuing all types of life. *Picard*, then, demonstrates how to break the age-old cycle of hostility, fear, and war. It does so by esteeming the values *Star Trek* elsewhere identifies as the benchmark of humanity: compassion and understanding.

## 6. The Measure of a Posthuman: Too Much Immortality?

PICARD: You haven't made me immortal?

SOONG: Oh, relax man. Everyone was paying attention. We took care of you.

—"Et in Arcadia Ego, Part II", *Star Trek: Picard*, 1.10. Dir. Akiva Goldsman

We learn early on in *Star Trek: Picard* that Jean-Luc Picard has a brain abnormality and his days are numbered. In an effort to resolve *Star Trek's* long-standing conflict between organic and artificial life, the writers of *Picard* make perhaps their most controversial move: after his death, Picard's consciousness is transferred into a synthetic body. Altering one of *Trek's* most beloved characters in such a fundamental way serves as a challenge to the audience: "Can you accept this?" season one showrunner Michael Chabon asks in an interview (Story Log: "Et in Arcadia Ego, Part II" ([Story Log 2023](#))). About this merging of man and machine, Chabon says he and the writers embraced this controversial move to drive home the show's theme that all life has value: "a Picard who is an artificial life form, a Picard who is an android . . . has to be Picard still" (Story Log: "Et in Arcadia Ego, Part II" ([Story Log 2023](#))).

The possibility of a posthuman existence—that is, humanity's evolution beyond its natural state that seeks to improve the human condition—has historically been taboo in *Star Trek*, particularly the technological posthuman: robots, androids, and cyborgs that attest to "the erosion of the human-machine distinction" ([Gildenhard and Zissos](#)

2013, p. 376). This occurs so frequently that McGrath argues that *Star Trek* has an “anti-posthuman bias” (McGrath 2016, p. 321). A particular manifestation of posthumanism involves technological advancements and even the merging of humans with machines. One vision of *Trek*’s posthumanism is most apparent in the Borg, a race of biological–machine hybrids that assimilate organic life against their will and fuse it with technology in the pursuit of perfection. The Borg first appeared in *The Next Generation* episode “Q Who” (2.16) and is a recurring enemy throughout the canon, including *Voyager*, the feature films, and all three seasons of *Picard*. The Borg as faceless drones who seek to assimilate life without emotion represents humanity’s fear that individual distinctiveness will be lost in a posthuman, technological existence that promotes a collective mindset (Brown 2013, pp. 442–43). Placing Picard into an artificial body is a reminder of the character’s personal history as the assimilated Borg drone Locutus and his role in the Battle of Wolf 359, where 11,000 people were killed (*TNG*: “The Best of Both Worlds”, 3.26 and “The Best of Both Worlds, Part II”, 4.1). To apply an optimistic reading to Picard’s posthumanity, the death of Picard’s human body has the potential to erase his corporeal experience as Locutus. The body that was assimilated is gone, theoretically allowing Picard to move on to a new future. Unfortunately, this narrative thread is dropped. Picard’s synthetic body is not mentioned much in later seasons of *Picard*, and season 3 in particular reopens old wounds by focusing on Picard’s Borg past as Locutus. Despite these inconsistencies in the series overall, the season 1 writers use Picard’s synthetic body to challenge *Star Trek*’s anti-posthumanist stance and revisit these key themes apparent in organic–artificial plotlines: the nature of mortality and immortality.

When Picard awakens in his new synthetic body, one of his primary concerns is whether he is immortal. This very question points to *Star Trek*’s prior treatments of immortality afforded by technology, specifically in the *TOS* episode “What Are Little Girls Made Of?” (1.9). Dr. Roger Korby (Michael Strong), an expert in archaeological medicine turned mad scientist, uses an ancient alien machine to make an artificial duplicate of a human and transfer human consciousness into the duplicate body, as he demonstrates with Kirk: “In android form, a human being could have practical immortality”, Korby says, arguing that humans residing in synthetic bodies would be much improved. They can be “programmed for the better”, without jealousy or hate, and “no one would ever need to die again. No disease, no deformities. [. . .] I’m offering you a practical heaven, a new paradise”. Evoking some aspects of Mary Shelley’s *Victor Frankenstein*, Korby sees himself as a godlike figure through his work of forging a new existence for humans by replacing biological humans with mechanical ones in the quest for a better society, but without regard for human autonomy. Korby reveals that he transferred his own consciousness into an android body, but he is altered from this experience into something not quite human. With the loss of his corporeal connection to humanity, he has also lost his morality and emotional connection, which George Kovacs argues is a feature *Star Trek* often applies to immortal, omnipotent beings that leads to stagnation for individuals and “a negation of humanity’s natural development” (Kovacs 2015, p. 209). While Korby views this posthuman existence as a forward evolution for humanity, it would involve leaving behind the key aspects that define *Star Trek*’s ideal of humanity, like empathy.

The ultimate benchmark for humanity is participating in death, a lesson that can be taken from the divine–mortal interactions throughout Greco-Roman mythology. Unlike Korby, Picard does not seek out or desire immortality via his new synthetic body. In his in-world past from *The Next Generation*, knowledge which the writers assume viewers have, Picard and the *Enterprise* crew witnessed several examples of humans corrupted by the prospect of immortality through technology, like when dying scientist Dr. Ira Graves (W. Morgan Sheppard) transfers his consciousness into Data to prolong his existence and loses control (*TNG*: “The Schizoid Man”, 2.6). Jon Wagner notes that *Star Trek* embraces complexity when it comes to biological life’s participation in immortality: there is no “royal road to the transcendence of human limitations through our merger with the machine, but neither does it provide an easy path out of this somewhat unsettling prospect”



(Wagner 1999, p. 135). *Picard* attempts to offer a middle ground, where Picard's synthetic body looks identical to his organic body, with age lines and all, but without the fatal brain abnormality. In anticipation of his concerns, Picard is assured that his new body will give him "more or less the same number of years you would have expected without the brain condition" (PIC: "Et in Arcadia Ego, Part II", 1.10). Picard benefits from a short-term extension of life that conveniently does not transgress the taboo concept of human immortality. Therefore, Picard's new body does not conflict with *Star Trek's* prior skepticism of artificial immortality, nor does it compromise his own moral code against immortality.

This point is driven home in a farewell scene between Picard and Data. They meet in an unlikely place, a complex quantum simulation, where Picard's consciousness is uploaded as it is readied for transfer into its new body, and where Data's memories reside after they were reconstituted prior to his death in *Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002). In this simulation, the two friends share their feelings for one another, and Data asks Picard to do him a favor and terminate his consciousness after he leaves: "I want to live, however briefly, knowing that my life is finite", Data says. "Mortality gives meaning to human life, Captain. Peace. Love. Friendship. These are precious because we know they cannot endure". The erasure of Data's consciousness is signaled visually, with his face aging and withering as though it were part of a natural organic process (a look never seen before on Data) until he vanishes into dust. This scene brings Data's story full circle as he asserts what can best be described as a human acceptance of death. In a way, he finally achieves his desire to participate in humanity through his death, in an extension of his cinematic death.

Gildenhard and Zissos argue that "posthumanism calls into question the human-machine dichotomy" (Gildenhard and Zissos 2013, p. 366), an idea that is played with here too. In a series of examples where posthumanism is at odds with humanity, *Picard* demonstrates that posthumanism can be done right—or at least done differently. There can be a sort of middle ground that, in a way, closes the gap between mortal and immortal, the biological and the synthetic, without compromising *Star Trek's* humanistic ideals. Immortal AI can die and mortal humans can participate, even slightly, in immortality, without losing sight of their humanity.

## 7. Conclusions: The Next Generation of *Trek* Tech

A question that continually crops up in *Star Trek's* portrait of AI is how humanity and "human-ness" are measured. Creativity and creative expression, along with emotional connection, are prioritized as defining features of liberal-thinking humanity in *Star Trek*, perhaps as a reflection of Gene Roddenberry's idealist view of humanity in the future. AI beings as simulacra are frequently prevented from being considered creative individuals because they are programmed to imitate humanity, calling into question whether their creative expression is derivative. In some ways, *Star Trek* is telling viewers that humanity is defined by its cultural artifacts. If AI is trained on those cultural artifacts and assumes the values of a society, then we are at risk of replicating our own systemic biases within the technologies we create. We are living in a cultural moment of emergent technologies designed to facilitate human connection and improve human life: the Internet, hand-held devices, medical implants, social media, personal digital assistants, and, very recently, generative AI—to name a few. The evolution of an individual piece of technology from one iteration to the next is often referred to in terms of a "generation". The next generation of tech often resolves to be better, faster, and more responsive than the previous generation. A cult-like following tends to develop around access to the most up-to-date technology and, once acquired, the old technology is cast off as obsolete. As tech improves at breakneck speed, SF literature, film, and television are a space to interrogate whether humanity is improving along with it. I see resonances of the generational evolution of technology in the Ages of Man from Hesiod's *Works and Days* (lines 106–201) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.89–150). In this narrative, different metals are a material metaphor to represent the degradation of humanity's moral character, while also capturing the material technological advancements in ancient Greece. According to Hesiod (2018), the gods created the first

“Golden Age” of humans to live a utopian existence in relative closeness to the gods where they would suffer no hard work or grief and where they would not age until they peacefully passed away in their sleep (109–116). Next, the gods create new, lesser human generations of Silver, followed by Bronze; then, a generation of Heroes and, finally, the generation of Iron. These later generations are characterized by a lack of reverence for the gods, warlike hostility, and a lack of morality; this is expressed in the progressive corruption of materials, from naturally occurring precious Gold and Silver to metallic alloys Bronze and Iron, the least precious of the group, produced by man-made processing techniques. Yet, the Ages of Man also narrates humanity’s journey toward innovation as the materials that define each generation become used in tools and weapons and in developing processing techniques to create more accessible (and cheaper) resources. This seems to suggest that humanity’s moral character and quality of life are negatively impacted by its own technological advancements. The more human society is sculpted by its technological advancements, the more corrupted that society is by its materialism, and the further away it deviates from the ideal, utopic existence near the gods. Even now, with each successive generation of tech, conversations continually resurface that reflect anxieties about how humans and the world are being altered by technology for the worse. These tend to include expressions of fear of machines replacing human jobs, the suppression of human creativity, the mass production of technology made from cheaper materials, the disposability of old technologies, and the loss of individuality and autonomy. Technology is associated with material and intellectual advancement, but it may be contributing to humanity’s de-evolution in other ways.

*Star Trek* is nearly prescient about the conflicts in our present moment with emergent technologies. The Doctor’s trial to determine ownership rights for his holo-novel (“Author, Author”, VOY 7.19—aired 2001) connects to similar controversies today about whether AI can produce unique artistic products, say, in an art contest (Roose 2022), or write scripts for a show like *Star Trek* (Coyle 2023). There is a lot of resistance to the idea that AI can substitute human creativity, and rightfully so. Art is something considered unique to humanity, a tangible byproduct of human endeavor and creativity. There is the danger of AI being seen as a viable option for cheap labor, which boardroom executives will take advantage of, despite the risk to labor rights and a diminished work product. At the moment, there is a clear distinction between what today’s AI can do (scrape from existing material on the Internet, infringing upon copyright to do so) and what an intelligent, sentient being like the Doctor can do. The Doctor being granted the legal status of an artist is celebrated as a step in the right direction for holographic rights, but calling AI an artist today strikes a much more controversial note.

In *Star Trek*, these conflicts are recapitulated and taken to the next level—one suitable for our present high-tech moment. From *The Original Series* to *Picard*, the conversation about human–artificial relationships has evolved toward a different expression, but the impetus is the same. *Star Trek* continually explores definitions of personhood for other beings and in the process evaluates what it means to be human. The prevalence of *Star Trek* in this latest wave of new series highlights its staying-power within the popular imagination as a means to resonate with our current cultural moment. *Star Trek* has more stories to tell and more worlds to explore.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Acknowledgments:** I am grateful to the participants of the panels “*Star Trek* and the Ancient Past” at the 2023 Antiquity in Media Studies Virtual Conference, where I presented an earlier version of this paper and received critical feedback that went into this article. Special thanks to Natalie J. Swain, my co-organizer for those panels, and Alex Tetlak, my colleague and fellow Trekkie, for providing thoughtful feedback on a draft of this paper.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- 1 Abbreviations for the *Star Trek* series will follow the standard notation from the fan-based *Star Trek* site [Memory Alpha](#) (n.d.): *Star Trek: The Original Series* (TOS); *Star Trek: The Animated Series* (TAS); *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG); *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* (DS9); *Star Trek: Voyager* (VOY); *Star Trek: Enterprise* (ENT); *Star Trek: Discovery* (DIS); *Star Trek: Short Treks* (ST); *Star Trek: Picard* (PIC); *Star Trek: Lower Decks* (LD); *Star Trek: Prodigy* (PRO); and *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* (SNW).
- 2 There are a few notable examples in Greek mythology of mortals who overcome the flaws in seeking immortality, such as Ganymede, Iphigenia/Iphimede, the Dioscuri, Ariadne, and Heracles, in addition to a great many from other world mythologies ([Baratz 2015](#), pp. 158–61). These represent the exception, rather than the rule.
- 3 In 2016, actor Brent Spiner said in an interview that he is “far too old to play Data again now”, and questioned his ability to convincingly portray Data as a “childlike, innocent character” ([Evans 2016](#)). Spiner later walked this back and returned to the role in *PIC*, with creative adjustments to the character to account for Spiner’s aging ([Pascale 2023](#)).
- 4 Chabon will return as the showrunner of *PIC* season 1. My analysis of Zora is greatly informed by Katie DeBoer’s presentation “Gender, Power, and Posthumanism in *Star Trek*’s ‘Calypso’ (2018)”, delivered at the Antiquity in Media Studies 2023 Virtual Conference.
- 5 Barrett also played the embodied characters Nurse Chapel in *TOS* and *TAS* (and later Dr. Chapel in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, 1979, dir. Robert Wise) and Lwaxana Troi, Deanna’s mother, in *TNG* and *DS9*. She was originally cast as Number One in the unaired *TOS* pilot episode “The Cage”. Her recurring work in these roles and as the ship’s computer, and her connection as Roddenberry’s spouse, confer Barrett with a sort of divine omnipresence and influence in the wider world of *Star Trek*.
- 6 For further treatment of the two traditions of ship’s computers represented by *Star Trek* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and how they are inscribed with markers of gender, see ([Faber 2020](#), pp. 25–56).
- 7 There are a number of other ancient myths that involve creation that could be applicable to studying contemporary machines: Prometheus, Pandora, the bronze giant Talos, and Hephaestus’ metallic helper maidens in *Iliad* 18. These have been fruitfully explored in other scholarly treatments ([Liveley 2006](#); [Raphael 2015](#); [Rogers and Stevens 2015](#); [Stevens 2015](#); [Keen 2017](#); [Mayor 2018](#); [Matz Forthcoming](#)) and so I prioritize Pygmalion’s statue here because of its more direct evocation of the concept of imitation and the simulacrum.
- 8 Translations of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* by Stephanie McCarter emphasize that the Latin word *simulacrum* means “statue” ([Ovid 2022](#), pp. 289–90). Stanley Lombardo’s translations also emphasize how the statue imitates human life, calling it a “facsimile body” for *simulati corporis* and opting to stick with “simulacrum” for *simulacra* ([Ovid 2004](#), pp. 275–76).
- 9 Zora’s emergent sentience is explored later in *Star Trek: Discovery*, particularly in “Forget Me Not” (3.4) and “Stormy Weather” (4.6).
- 10 Some audiences of SF commonly understand the term “sentience” to describe “a being with intelligence, a thinking being”, although another appropriate term borrowed from philosophy would be “sapience” ([Rosenstand 2016](#), pp. 177–78 note 2). In “The Measure of a Man”, Data is determined to meet two criteria for “sentience” (intelligence and self-awareness), while the third criterion (consciousness) is left undetermined.
- 11 *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* ([Berman and Piller 1993–1999](#)) is unique in that it explores “religious pluralism” and “‘alternative’ spiritualities” through the Bajorans, who worship the Prophets as their planet’s gods ([McGrath 2015](#), p. 472; see also [Linford 1999](#)). According to others, however, the Prophets are simply “wormhole aliens”, transdimensional beings who reside in a stable wormhole, indicating a rational explanation for what religion is to some.
- 12 This is likely due to Patrick Stewart’s mandate that he would only return for Picard if his character no longer served in Starfleet, and that he would not wear “any kind of uniform or badges”. The “no-uniform rule”, Stewart claims, was particularly tough for the writing team to follow and he was often asked to reconsider ([Stewart 2023](#), pp. 430–31).
- 13 *Voyager* also plays with this outcome of a servile class of holograms comprised of the discontinued EMH Mark I generation, who bear the visage of the Doctor but who labor in the dilithium mines and waste transfer (“Life Line”, 6.24; “Author, Author”, 7.19). In an expression of some optimism, the servile holograms are briefly shown in the mines at the end of “Author, Author” reading the Doctor’s holographic novel about holo-rights, “Photons Be Free.”

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