

Melancthe: A Vance Answer to A.I.

I wonder: Has Melancthe ever been explored before in terms of A.I.?

For if not, that presents a glaring deficiency, in my humble opinion, of understanding one of Jack's most spectacular creations!

Thence, I wish to present a thesis that Melancthe furnished Jack's *Lyonesse* an outlet to ASK a profound & engaging question relative to an A.I. entity.

I urge a 'close reading' of the previous sentence, if I may. I am not necessarily saying Jack Vance is asking a question about A.I.! That would presume intentionality on Jack's part toward Melancthe and A.I. I am anti-intentionalist. The 'work' speaks for itself. And that expressly is how Vance wanted his works to be regarded. It is how scholars cognize Shakespeare. Not only do we NOT know his intentions, we don't even indisputably know that he wrote all that bears his name. My thesis, thence is that Vance's work, *Lyonesse* of itself, can be understood to ask a **deep question regarding A.I.**

But I admit I am open to the possibility that Jack, in his own way, does effectively ask such a question. How? I will offer my thought on that in an Addendum below. For if so, it so nicely answers something I've always found peculiar in *Lyonesse*.

Definitionally at the outset, Artificial Intelligence seems commonly understood to include many facets in its description, things like reasoning and human problem solving, language, learning, decision-making, planning, active perception, but probably most touted of all, self-awareness. Conformations that might look like people are ultra-advanced 'robots' – that is, not humans – that as A.I. entities are intelligent, adaptable, and most vitally of all, self-aware, or as is often alternatively put, conscious.

I put 'robots' in tick marks since these have their own conceptual history. If pressed I would remark that robots are merely computers + motility. Car factories use robotic arms to assemble automobiles. This is in contrast to the occurrence of veritable A.I. and a prospectively historic but cautionary Singularity if in reality it comes about, (cf. Wikipedia).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technological_singularity

Next, for the sake of historical context regarding Vance:

Jack Vance simply doesn't do robots in his futures (A.I. or not). It's not a criticism, this statement is just a recognition of Jack's preferences in the imagining of his brand of speculative futures. He doesn't formulate Asimovian positronic-brains. He doesn't devise androids of a type capable of seamless human societal integration as in the mode of either Star Trek (Mr. Data) or Star Wars (R5-D4, AP-5, BD-1, C1-10P, 4-LOM, IG-11, EV-9D9, R1-J5, 2-1B, L3-37, 0-0-0 ... DJ Romba, Cinderoomba, non-cyborg Robocop).

Vance's literature maintains focus on human character, human cultures, plots of mystery, along with broad doses of anthropology, sociology, and some themes from biology, especially exo-planetary biomes and ecology, xenozoology, genetics, adaptations, mental manipulation (or even its bodily transfer!). Occasionally Jack touches on paranormal notions, most especially telepathy, but once put forth teletactility (Nopalgarth).

As put forth in the Jack Vance entry from Wikipedia, "Robots, for example, are almost entirely absent, though the short story "The Uninhibited Robot" features a computer gone awry." (This I know well, as I wrote that statement; it became adopted and has been sanctified now for going on a decade.)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Vance

But what if Jack had actually created an entity that looks completely human, and can ‘think’, ‘talk’ and clasp onto a day-to-day ‘will’ all of itself, and to all mutual public perception appears to be human, yet in some vital ultimate essence is still NOT fully human?

It is artificial (‘made’), yet it hosts an intelligence such that it possesses an authentic self-awareness.

The candidate for this is Melancthe.

First, who will say she is not fully human? Arch-magician Murgan works up to an tentative answer this way: *“There is a recurrent question which troubles me. At least once each day I ask myself: where is Desmei?”* (M p. 173).

SIDEBAR. In my post “Meliorating Desmei”, my conjecture answers this: Desmei, contaminated by former contact with demonland Mel – which of itself comprises this green node of depravity (even perhaps a cacodæmon) – hides in the demon realm of Xabiste; she hides there after creating Carfilhiot, Melancthe **and** disposing much of the residual dregs that comprise the green miasma, which will eventually self-condense into the Green Pearl.

<https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/jackvance/meliorating-desmei-t5007.html>

Continuing with this conversation, Shimrod then offers:

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{ibid.} “She disappeared, after creating Carfilhiot and Melancthe: that is the general understanding.”

Murgan’s mouth took on a wry twist. “Was it all so simple? Did Desmei truly entrust her revenge to the likes of Carfilhiot and Melancthe – the one a monster, the other an unhappy dreamer?”

(As an aside we can note that neither Murgan nor Shimrod account for the green miasma; obviously it is unknown to them.)

Well, humans can be unhappy dreamers while still being all-human; it might indeed be one very essential mark of humanness to be such, at least by sundry perspectives (e.g., many Existentialists)!

To somehow validate that Melancthe is not fully human we might instead attend to this question in two other ways: Melancthe’s self-assessment, and an outside expert assessment.

Melancthe, as to herself:

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[M pp.195-6] “As for me, I was brought naked and empty into the world; it was only required that I imitate humanity, not that I should become human. I do not know what sort of creature I am. This is the subject of my reflections. They are complicated. Since I know no human emotions, I have contrived an entire new compendium, which only I can feel.”

[...]

“It may be that instead of emotion, I feel sensation only, which I think to be emotion. This is how an insect feels the moods of its life.”

[Shimrod] “In your new set of emotions, do you have equivalents for ‘good’ and ‘bad’?”

“These are not emotions! You are trying to trick me into talking your language! Very well; I shall answer. I do not know what to think of myself. Since I am not human, I wonder what I am and how my life will go.”

Shimrod sat back and reflected. “At one time you served Tamurello: why did you do so?”

“That was the behest built into my brain.”

This makes for a strong case that Melancthe's self-awareness encounters a dilemma she so far has been unable to resolve. She 'knows' in her gut that she is an outsider to humanity; as a reflection of this angst, she along with two other oddities unite at night near the sea to sing of their shared forlornness.

The problem is that this self-perception could be from a person fully human who suffers under a delusion ... a mental illness. Anyone who has read Oliver Sacks' book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat* will understand that there are bizarre neurological disorders: people afflicted with fantastic perceptual and intellectual aberrations (as legitimately did the man of the title); who are no longer able to recognize people and common objects.

She might also be fully human but suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder. *"People with BPD tend to have trouble seeing their identity clearly. In particular, they tend to have difficulty knowing what they value, believe, prefer, and enjoy."* *"This can cause people with BPD to feel 'empty' and 'lost,'" [Wikipedia],* which describes Melancthe very closely! Beside disturbed patterns of thinking – "cognitive distortions" – those with BPD can have emotional instability – called "affective dysregulation" – that manifests in Melancthe's case as a notion that she has zero emotionality.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borderline_personality_disorder

So Melancthe's self-assessment doesn't conclusively point to her being not fully human. It could alternately reveal she is fully human with a mental disorder distorting her self-perception as a human.

So IF we were wanting to conclude that Melancthe is NOT fully human, we have one last resort to look to. That would be an appraisal from an objective, outside expert; something of infallible perception.

In Madouc, we do indeed get exactly that! Thank you, Jack!, for that clinches this key question.

We at last are allowed to keys to Melancthe's 'being' by the Mang Seven efferents, Voner and Skel, who are very much like the cogently powerful sandestins in their being locally omniscient. (E.g., Murgen's sandestin Rylf could perceive that the 'moth' Murgen saw was in fact a shybalt, Zagzig, when an arch-magician of indisputable adeptness could himself not.)

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{M p. 302} Travec whispered: "Voner! What do you see?"

"There is green in the woman [Melancthe, now inhabited by Desmei]. A tendril touches her; it darts so swift and sudden that I cannot trace it."

"What does that mean? Is she a node of force?"

"She is a shell."

And here, finally – but conclusively{!} – is our answer. Melancthe is a shell in her absolute essence. Voner has assessed Melancthe to a rigorous, ontological verity!

And by that we can now validate Melancthe's own self-perceptions: she is NOT suffering from mental disorder, NOT under a delusion, NOT exhibiting Borderline Personality Disorder.

Melancthe's self-realization that she is not a full human is completely accurate – that she is an imitation without a human completeness. She legitimately recognizes her incongruity amidst humanity, things like that she was 'made', not birthed; her creation was as an adult, not a child; that she will never relate to growing up from a childhood because she never had a childhood. And significantly that she cannot be sure if she actually experiences emotionality, and so has every right to question this facet about her interior mental life.

With this established, what do we wind up with? Melancthe is a simulacrum of a most beautiful female human; she can think, talk, plan, perceive, etc., but most crucially of all, she is self-aware!!

My thesis, therefore, is that with Melancthe, Jack Vance created an A.I. entity! Intentionally or not, in any final analysis she constitutes a host for Artificial Intelligence.

And what is it that Lyonesse asks about Melancthe? Which is to say, about A.I.? In the ordeal of having us discern Melancthe's persistent self-questioning trepidation, what might all that indicate?

Jack's creation of Melancthe, in the exact way he has created her, of itself poses **The Question: What will be at the core of an A.I.'s own self-aware mind?**

Thence, from *Lyonesse* comes a speculative venture into the heart & nucleus of an artificial intelligence's own self-awareness: this exacting unforeseen center-most kernel of its mind.

I'd hazard this is not especially speculative science, not even as cognitive science, but rather it is speculative philosophy{!}, reaching out to the obscure, abstruse ranges of the Philosophy of Mind.

This very question is an arresting & electrifying unknown to ponder!

Jack has no duty to answer such a question. But through Melancthe and her ennui in being self-aware, a gateway has been opened for us to glimpse into and muse.

Allegorically, it is a gateway to a very remote star system in a fantastically distant galaxy.

And ahem with a genius punchline to boot? Come to think of it: **YES!**

In magnificent *IRONY*, Jack created a humanlike platform for A.I. that is *NOT* in any science-fictional future, but in the fairly distant past, the period known as Late Antiquity!

BwaHaHaaa! . . . and hot cucaracha!

Undiluted genius before our very eyes!

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ADDENDUM

(You may skip this section. There will be no pop-quiz on this material.)

This part is more speculative in that I make a bit of presumption on Jack's justification – or his evaluative motive – specifically concerning Melancthe's termination. It is a reach for my anti-intentionalism.

In the chain off my post "Melancthe The Unobtainable" (click on link if desired), the final demise of Melancthe finds discussion. My own was that:

<https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/jackvance/melancthe-the-unobtainable-t4707.html>

Post #30: "Personally, I suppose I would have not missed Melthancthe's being bloodily torn apart to her grisly death. It's a repugnant, abominable end for her."

<https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/jackvance/melancthe-the-unobtainable-t4707-s20.html>

I never understood why Jack would mete out such an ending to this truly amazing literary creation, a standout character as impactfully picturesque as (or near) Navarth!

I'm sure it varies across the Vance fandom, but some readers may come to accommodate this ghastly end of hers as 'due justice' for Melancthe being evil – or at least that she was created by an evil sorceress (thus evil by source and by association), and that she was spitefully devised as an instrument of revenge upon men via her lovelorn unobtainability, a harsh withering for any deeply loving human relationship.

I argued (and do argue) against any doltish notion that Melancthe was some kind of co-villain with Tamurello, but perhaps clearest in argumentation was my comparison of Melancthe to T'sais (apparently a 'first' on JVMB, maybe):

Post #43: "The difference between T'sais and Melancthe, both being created creatures, both having an innate flaw, is that for T'sais the flaw was unintended, whereas for the creation of Melancthe the flaw was intended; thereby, Melancthe has a *Telos*. But a baneful *Telos* with the glimmer of a very deep-down halo."

<https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/jackvance/melancthe-the-unobtainable-t4707-s40.html>

That was my thinking about Melancthe. My notion of a very deep-down halo pertained to Melancthe's gravid potential for redemption. By becoming a Heroine, she could be redeemed into full humanness. I envisioned three strands of outcome along the lines of this proposed deep-down halo. It is in post #46 partially quoted here, but please feel free to skip it, it being all pipe smoke.

<https://www.tapatalk.com/groups/jackvance/melancthe-the-unobtainable-t4707-s40.html>

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[...] my imagining along these lines results in a Fortuitous Trident: avoid the grisly waste of a brilliantly conceived character; introduce a heroine who overcomes (or at least happily survives) an evil onus; rotisserie his [Jack's] critics about a purported misogynist bent, unfair as many say that that charge is.

As I see it, Melancthe's disposition could have embraced 3 very positive directions.

1. **The Heroine Vanquisher.** As I offered as might have been finished by J.K. Rowling, [see post #20 in another chain](#). It is consistent with a created *Lyonnesse* scion eventually evolving into their own personhood, and I like that Melancthe would overcome Desmei's evil onus out of an innate magic drawn out of herself that implicates (only for those who'd wish to view it this way) that Love overpowers Malevolence. That Melancthe would generate this magic out of her own selfless desire for a True Love (that Jack would have to identify, a fascinating speculation in itself!) would prove her to be The Heroine Vanquisher of her built-in evil onus, thus usurping Desmei.
2. **Heroine At The Crucial Moment.** Or Melancthe is allowed past the gryph-guards to enter Swer Smold, and she aids Murgan in some vital way, such that Murgan rewards Melancthe by healing her with magic as potent as Desmei's (or more cogent, given it's the Arch-Mage Murgan). Jack could have easily integrated this plot variation within Murgan's soon upcoming struggle. Melancthe, justly rewarded, thence becomes a full person (like Shimrod) and can go off capable of a fulfilled, contented, and at last normal life. Well & righteously deserved, Heroine At The Crucial Moment!
3. **Memorable Bittersweet Heroine.** Or Melancthe's character is 'disposed' out of her own self-sacrifice in some situation where that sacrifice constituted the singly victorious move. As (2) above, Jack could have easily contrived this as a permutation to Murgan's soon upcoming struggle. Though Melancthe, hereby, is killed (as she is anyway, yet ignobly to the extreme) this produces a virtuous end for Melancthe – vastly less appalling and vastly more appealing – and one where its inherent virtue, being conscious self-sacrifice, overwhelms whatever tribulations Melancthe had caused in her past life under Desmei's evil onus. Melancthe – our Memorable Bittersweet Heroine!

Observably none of this pipe-dreaming ever happened. There was NO redemption of Melancthe into full humanness, (alas for the missed opportunity{!} I still feel). We are left as I was at the beginning of this Addendum: It's a repugnant, abominable end for her.

Here is my new thinking toward Jack having this most marvelous, most piquant literary creation of his, Melanthe, wind up being torn to pieces – like she’s so much papier-mâché.

In essence it is because Melanthe – “empty” and a “shell”, a ‘thing’ required only to “imitate humanity” – **is** an A.I. entity, even if Jack did not expressly conceive in terms of ‘A.I.’; but I aver he conceived of something that in every possible way is a complete equivalence to an A.I. entity. This is simply a *de facto* Truth.

Jack, in my estimate, discerned this all along about her – and it forms the anchor to his evaluation of her. Therefore it makes sense that the emotional stock due Melanthe is proportional only to her being an A.I. entity. (This would include any equivalency of A.I. concept Jack had had of her.)

In a makeshift and inelegant way, one would feel greater sorrow for the loss of a dear pet than the breakdown of a fancy automobile.

It happily makes complete sense!

Her purpose – the same *Telos* I mention above – is satisfied by the linking of herself to Torqual (another behest somehow input into her brain) until such time (via Lucanor’s indication) that a Xabiste passageway opened, whereby Desmei could come forth from Xabiste onto Gaeon Earth to inhabit the shell that is Melanthe in order to directly ensnare Torqual as a satisfactorily capable agency to work along (coerced) with Desmei’s ultimate machinations against Murgan.

That all being done (i.e., attempted), then Melanthe is done! Shred the papier-mâché. Shed no tears.

That is now my thinking. For me, I like it much better than that disconsolate despondence I always felt prior, for I made the mistake of humanizing her too much, a mistake Jack did not make. I never had apprehended this evaluative motive that I now surmise Jack had always had. What is crucial is the casting of Melanthe into a genuine A.I. entity that she *perforce* displays being.

AND, as a genuine A.I. entity, I posit that Melanthe is hands-down likely the BEST A.I. entity in all of speculative literature! Another splendid spangled invention of Jack’s that is *nonpareil*.