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Gender and Sexuality Performance by Captain Kirk, Spock, and the Women

Lu Zhao

"One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one," as Simone De Beauvoir famously said (cited in Butler, 3). Gender and sexuality, as Judith Butler argues, are not innate features of a person, but are created from constant performance (11). The "proper" actions for these performances are taught by the environment that people live in. A recent but influential method of teaching these scripts is through television, such as the series *Star Trek: The Original Series* (ST:TOS), filmed in the United States of America (US). This show was first aired on September 8th, 1966 in the US during a time of tremendous change (Gerrold, 2006). During the 1960s, racial civil rights were being rewritten with Martin Luther's advocacy and various pieces of legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964; the Vietnam War was being fought and student demonstrators against the war became a common sight; the Counter Revolution was born and sexual norms loosened; and the United States rushed to beat Russia to the moon as part of the Cold War ("Events 1960s," n.d.). ST:TOS was supposed to run for five seasons, but its audience was so small that it was perpetually in danger of being cancelled and only lasted three seasons (Gerrold, 2006). Using this show, it is possible to observe how an idealized world envisions gender and sexuality performance. Furthermore, viewers are not passive receptacles for the knowledge of these scripts. Instead, viewers are able to negotiate these scripts and disrupt the dominant representation of gender and sexuality in their recreations of this show in forms such as fanfiction. However, viewers can only ever negotiate within the boundaries of these scripts; they can never actually escape the scripts to create something completely new.

ST:TOS is a great text to study the dominant gender and sexuality performances taught in society because it is a very influential utopian text. Its impact can be felt from the fact that it is now impossible to imagine a future without warp drive and phasers. Furthermore, ST:TOS has created the template for the utopian science-fiction text where there is gender and sexual equality. Viewers reproduce the gender and sexuality performances they see in the show in their striving to reproduce the *Trek* utopian future that promises gender and sexual equality. Because ST:TOS is very influential, it is necessary to analyse exactly what kind of equality, if it can be called that, this future offers its audience. Its gender and sexuality beliefs cannot be analysed according to what it directly says about these topics through explicit character lines or plotlines, but must be seen through the implicit methods of studying character performance and reaction to other characters' performance because television texts can be ambivalent, presenting two contradicting views, and then implying one is more valued (Cloud, 333). A useful way of analysing a *Trek* utopia will actually create gender and sexual equality is by looking how *Trek* characters perform gender and sexuality.

Men and women in ST:TOS perform very different gender scripts, which are dichotomous of each other and embody traditional gender stereotypes. Because *Star Trek* women perform according to Beauvoir's view as the Other of the masculine self, as cited in Butler, one must first see how masculinity is performed before looking at the feminine performance (14). Using Captain James T. Kirk as an example, it can be shown that men are still the oppressive patriarchy force bent on dominating the universe (Helford, 10). He reads as traditional masculinity through his active pursuit of his goals, rationality and calmness in the face of danger, competence, and White patriarchal superiority. There are a couple of plotlines that all the ST:TOS episodes may be categorized under and, in each of them, Kirk uses his masculine qualities to solve the episode's problem. He displays his active nature by trying to solve whatever problem he faces with calmness and rationality rather than passively waiting for someone else, like Spock, to solve the problem for him. In addition, nothing showcases his competence and superiority better than the fact that at the end of every episode, he is successful in solving the problem and is able to return to the Captain's chair to make a quip to Spock or McCoy. Kirk performs the traditional masculine script to perfection through his ability to use masculine actions to successfully solve the problems of each episode.

Kirk is most famous for one particular aspect of the masculine narrative that he plays particularly well: the seduction of all young and beautiful women who cross his path. To list all the women he pursues or is desired by would require listing almost every female character in the show. Kirk is often defined entirely by his hypermasculine sexuality that reinforces his role in a patriarchal social system (Helford, 10). It is in romantic interactions that the differences in the gender scripts become glaringly obvious, in particular women's roles as appendages and subordinates of men. Most women in the show, especially minor characters, are defined by their relationship to a male character. Examples would include Christine Chapel and Leila Kalomi. Nurse Chapel is a reoccurring female character who always performs her role in relation to a male character. She is first shown in the episode "The Naked Time," where she expresses her love for Spock. In subsequent episodes, she is mainly shown in scenes where she fawns over Spock or takes orders from McCoy. The episode "What are Little Girls Made Of" reveals that Nurse Chapel's entire reason for taking a deep space mission and abandoning her career in bio-research is to search for her lost fiancée. Nurse Chapel never performs as anything other than a woman who orients her life around men.

This type of female gender performance is even more blatant in the case of Leila Kalomi in the episode "This Side of Paradise." Although in the episode she is described as an intelligent and skilled botanist, she never performs any actions that indicate either trait. Her entire performance in the episode revolved around her love for Spock. When he rejects her at the end of the episode, her break-down is vicious enough to expel the spores, which were the episode's central concern and could only be expelled by violent emotion. This contrasts with Spock's spore expulsion scene,

in which he attacks Kirk. The differences in their performances suggest the traditional gender stereotypes where men are outward-oriented and women are inward-focused. Nurse Chapel and Dr. Kalmoi's performances revolve around the men in their lives and their characters never evolve beyond being appendages and subordinates of men.

Nurse Chapel's and Dr. Kalmoi's performances, like those of the other women in ST:TOS, display other traditional feminine traits that show them as Other to the masculine narrative. Kirk, like the other men in ST:TOS, is active in his pursuit of his goals, rational and calm in the face of danger, competent, and superior; women, on the other hand, are passive, hysterical in the face of danger, incompetent, inferior, and, most importantly, orient their lives around men. In romantic relationships *Trek* women do not actively pursue their love interests; instead, they are content to suffer their feelings of love silently. Nurse Chapel only speaks of her love for Spock when she is under the influence of an illness, as seen in the episode "The Naked Time," or under mind control, as in "Plato's Stepchildren". She is only active when she is not normal; when she is a normal woman, she is passive. This again reinforces the disturbing implication that good women should passively wait for the men in their lives to act on or for them rather than themselves acting for themselves.

Other disturbing implications can be seen in the example of Marla McGivers, in the episode "Space Seed". She is shown to swoon into the arms of Khan, an enemy of the Enterprise and someone who bullies her. Additionally, she is incompetent. Her only useful action is to free Kirk so that he could defeat Khan. While Kirk, a male, calmly creates a plan to retake the Enterprise, she has an emotional breakdown. Her constantly changing loyalties displays another traditional feminine trait, fickleness. In addition, at the end of the episode she decides to go with Khan, a man whose idea of romancing her was to bully and force himself on her. This implies that a good woman should stay with and subordinate their lives to the men in her life even if they abuse her. Women in ST: TOS consistently perform their roles as the Other of the masculine discourse, appendages of the men in their lives, and subordinates to them. Women and men perform vastly different gender scripts that are dichotomous of each other and the male performance is consistently shown as superior.

In ST:TOS, all the characters perform their gender using traditional gender actions and cues. The show explores where these restrictive genders comes from in its last episode, "Turnabout Intruder" (Helford, 14). Contrary to Butler's argument that gender performance is a social construct, this episode demonstrates that gender performance is an innate feature of a person. In the episode, Janice Lester, an old romantic partner of Kirk, switches bodies with Kirk because she wants to become a Starfleet captain and only men are allowed to this position. Yet, after the switch, their gender performance does not change: Kirk still performs as a man and Dr. Lester still performs as a woman. This difference is clearly illustrated in the hearing scene where Kirk is calm and rational throughout it while Dr. Lester displays stereotypical female traits with her "shrill accusations of

betrayal, accompanied by fist-pounding and demands for the death penalty" (Helford, 16). This episode does not criticize Starfleet's sexist policy; instead, it justifies it by showing women as unfit for command positions because of their feminine traits that they cannot get rid of, even if they switch to a male body. Dr. Lester is one of the strongest female characters in the show, yet she is only portrayed as rational way when she is actually the male Kirk. The real Dr. Lester is portrayed as the stereotypical female who cannot accept her inferior status in society and suffers insanity when she tries to overcome her subordinate status. This implies that if the "utopia" of the Federation is to exist, Trek women must remain in their traditional gender scripts, where they will always be defined by their relationships to males because they can never overcome their female weakness.

ST:TOS pretends to move forward by creating new performances of gender; however, this new performance is very much like the old performance. Its "new" performances actually maintain the status quo. ST: TOS creates a few cosmetic changes to create the illusion of a world of equality, while actually reproducing the current gender scripts.

In 2009, ST:TOS was given a reboot in the movie *Star Trek*, commonly called *Star Trek IX* (ST:IX) because of the year it came out (*Star Trek*). While one might expect that with the passage of almost four decades, gender performance might have changed, it has not. Some of this traditional gender performance might be explained away by an argument for staying true to canon. Most of the performance, however, cannot be explained by staying true to canon especially since it violates the spirit of equality that ST:TOS professes to possess. Women in this reboot are still passive appendages and subordinates of men. Although they were shown to be less hysterical in the face of danger, that could be explained by the fact that no woman was given enough screen time to illustrate how they might react to danger. To illustrate, Lt. Uhura's and Amanda Grayson's roles in this movie revolve around their relationship with Spock. Most of Lt. Uhura's scenes involve her romantic relationship with Spock. Uhara seems to have used this relationship to be assigned to the Enterprise (*Star Trek*). It is a little uncomfortable to realize the only main female character got her position by using a stereotypical female trait, seduction. In addition, while her first three scenes do not involve Spock, they involve Kirk. Her performance in those scenes still revolves around her relationship with a man. Finally, the only scene that showcases her skills involves Spock defending the fact that she has any. Lt. Uhura is never shown without a man to help and defend her performance.

This female script is even more explicit with Amanda Grayson, a woman who only exists to create drama for the male character she is attached to. Lady Grayson appears in two scenes of the movie. In the first scene, she is with her son Spock; the scene establishes her importance to Spock as his mother, a traditional feminine role. In the second scene she dies. This causes Spock a lot of angst and is part of reason he is emotionally compromised, something Kirk uses to get him to resign as captain of the Enterprise. Lady Grayson has two more scenes, cut from the movie's final release;

however, they do not further develop her character. Instead, the scenes simply reinforce her importance to Spock as his mother. Lady Grayson exists in this movie only to cause emotional drama for her son. Lt. Uhura and Lady Grayson are two of the only female characters with speaking lines and their performance would not have been out of place in the 1960's version of ST:TOS. Apparently, staying true to canon requires not trying to live up to the spirit of *Star Trek*, which invokes gender equality, but reproducing the sexist representations of the original show.

Audiences of ST:TOS and ST:IX will watch these gender performances and use these scripts in their daily lives; however, this does not mean that they cannot engage with the gender concepts that the show expresses. For example, in the "gender-flipping" trope that is used in *Star Trek* fanfiction, authors may change the sex of one or more characters, either naturally or through an accident of some kind. This is most often done with male characters flipping to female characters, where the author of the text generally keeps the personality traits of the original character. This type of fanfiction is an interesting example of what viewers consider appropriate for characters who play against expected gender performance. Additionally, it highlights the fact that the audience recognizes that behaviour is not neutral, but judged according to how closely it aligns with socially accepted scripts. Often in these stories when a person goes against the dominant scripts, the person is punished for her deviation by social condemnation shown through the ostracization by the characters around her, not applauded for trying to create a new script. Unfortunately, this suggest that writers accept the assumption that people who play against accepted gender performances must be punished and that they can only gain happiness when they play within dominant scripts. Writers cannot envision a world where a character's gender will not determine how their behaviour is judged; they can only play around with the accepted scripts. This type of fanfiction does not challenge the performances offered by ST:TOS.

An example of such fanfiction is "Believing Rumours," by ArwendeImladris. "Believing" tells a story of James "Jamie" T. Kirkk, born female. In the story, she has the same reputation as James Kirk of being sexually promiscuous. Yet she is not applauded for this trait as the male Kirk is in the show. Instead, she is called a slut, and her love interest refuses her affections, feeling that her promiscuous past makes her an unsuitable mate. Later, he becomes her lover only when he realizes she is actually a virgin. Jamie only gets her man when she proves that she is actually adhering to the female gender script rather than playing against it.

Not only does ST:TOS promise a world of gender equality, it promises a world of sexual equality. Just as how it fails on its promise of gender equality, it fails on its promise of sexual equality. While the Federation might promise sexual equality, it actually shows a world where people are assumed to be heterosexual rather than of neutral sexuality and, therefore, plays into the compulsory heterosexuality that Butler associates with current dominant gender performances. All the char-

acters in ST:TOS are paired up with opposite-sex characters for romantic relationships, and show romantic interest exclusively in the opposite sex. There is not a whiff of intentional homosexual or bisexual performance by any of the characters in ST:TOS; audiences would have to wait for *Star Trek: The Next Generation* for the *Trek* universe to try to engage in the issue of sexuality. The silence on the matter of sexuality on the show does not give it a sense of sexuality equality, but rather reinforces the idea that the *Trek* utopia is a heterosexual paradise.

That audiences might read this intent from the show does not stop them from negotiating with this script by reading the cues of the show through the lens of other scripts. One of the results is slash fanfiction where viewers choose to view the relationship between two characters who spend a lot of unnecessary time with each other, defend each other, and are willing to do anything for the other person as a romantic relationship. The romantic relationship is seen as the "true" relationship between the two characters despite all protests of friendship by the characters in canon and the characters frequently getting temporary love interests. A famous example would be the relationship between Kirk and Spock, which started the slash fanfiction tradition (Jenkins, 187).

Slash authors negotiate with the dominant gender and sexuality scripts to blur the boundaries between the genders by breaking the compulsory heterosexuality that takes place in the show and giving them performance characteristics of the other gender. For example, if the characters are male, they often shown to be concerned with the emotional aspects of the romantic relationship and are more willing to express their emotions. In other words, these characters are feminized to a certain degree. If the characters are women, they become masculinized through their assertive and active pursuit of their goals and their performances no longer revolves around the men in their lives. By reading heterosexual characters' performances through a romantic script, viewers are able to negotiate a gender performance that displays more fluidity and does not denigrate a particular set of gendered traits.

Yet, while the audience is able to negotiate with the script, they cannot escape the dominant scripts that their cultures have taught them. Viewers might challenge the gender and sexuality performance of the characters on ST:TOS, but they do this using the scripts that society has given them, rather than creating their own. The writer are generally female and, thus, there is an emphasis on a more feminine orientation in the relationship, such as love as the foundations of a permanent relationship, an emphasis on equality in the relationship, and extensive foreplay (Green, C. Jenkins, and H. Jenkins, 80). However, while this allows for a more fluid gender and sexuality performance, the author does not actually challenge whether this is the correct script for a romantic relationship. They do not challenge whether relationships should be monogamous, have a healthy sex life, and a concern with love. Writers might negotiate with the dominant scripts; however, they do this by applying scripts in novel ways rather than challenging the assumptions on which these scripts rest

on. Slash fanfiction seems not to be as much as a challenge of dominant performances as much as the authors have internalized the scripts so fully that they cannot help but see its cues everywhere.

Furthermore, because writers of slash fanfiction challenge dominant sexual scripts by using other scripts, this can have the unintended effect of reinforcing the dominant scripts. For example, in most portrayals of a romantic relationship, most writers still apply a traditional dominant/submissive dichotomy, which is problematic when applied to heterosexual relationship and even more so to homosexual relationships. Using a male pair as an example, the dominant person in the relationship is the one who penetrates the submissive, generally through anal sex. Leaving aside the problems inherent in these sex assumptions, this application of the dichotomy is problematic because writers generally associate gender performance with this dichotomy. The dominant sexual partner generally performs as a male and the submissive sexual partner performs as a female. Sometimes this characterization can be so well applied that the submissive partner seems little more than a woman with a penis. For example, the submissive partner will be emotional, require his dominant partner to save him, and orient his life around the love of his dominant partner. When this kind of feminization happens, authors have managed to negotiate gender and sexuality performances so that it no longer assumes that gender is innate and heterosexuality the norm. These scripts falter, howoever, by keeping the gender performance and simply using a different criterion (e.g. actions during homosexual sex) in its application and challenges compulsory heterosexuality by reproducing heterosexual scripts in homosexual romantic relationships.

ST:TOS promises a utopia world in the future with gender and sexual equality, but its performance of gender and sexuality undermines this promise. Gender performances are radically different for the men and women of ST:TOS and far from equal. Men and women reproduce traditional gender roles with women being the Other to the masculine discourse and as passive appendages and subordinate to men. Furthermore, ST:TOS asserts that this performance is inherent in the person and cannot be changed even if the person switches to an opposite sexed body, which justifies its sexist policies. Even worse, it seems that audiences accept these gender performances and believes that deviation from accepted gender performance should be punished. If women have the short end of the stick with their marginal positions in ST:TOS, non-heterosexuals have it even worse because they do not even exist in the compulsory heterosexuality of this supposed utopia. Viewers may challenge these gender and sexuality performances through mediums such as fanfiction. Yet while the viewers can negotiate with the presented scripts, they most often do this by using other socially dominant scripts. By slashing platonic relationships, for example, viewers are simply using the socially acceptable romantic script rather than creating their own. Furthermore, in their negotiations, fanfiction authors can sometimes reproduce the very performances they are challenging. These authors do not break free of socially-expected performances and generally do not challenge

the assumptions upon which these scripts rest. As long as the audience uses the current gender and sexual scripts, it remains hard to see a future where the promised *Trek* utopia of gender and sexual equality can ever occur.

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