

“The Trouble With Tribbles”: A Reading

by Gord Sellar

The original series Star Trek episode “The Trouble with Tribbles” is understandably famous. Most fans remember, first and foremost, the plot to which the title refers, involving a cute-but-useless alien species of parasite that infests the Starship Enterprise (as well as a space station). Some might also remember the other major plot of the story, involving a Klingon conspiracy to destroy the Federation’s “quadrotriticale” (i.e. wheat) seeds and prevent the Federation from colonizing a nearby planet.

What most fans do not immediately recall is how both of these intersecting plots allow us an insight into how Captain Kirk reflects middle American identity and problems in the 1960s. Normally the (ostensibly) sexy, powerful man in charge of the ship, in “The Trouble With Tribbles” Kirk is reduced to a frustrated, put-upon mess of a man who seems less like a formidable and brilliant spaceship captain, and more like a frustrated factory middle-manager in some random contemporary American town.

On the one hand, Kirk struggles with those he must manage, the crew of the Starship Enterprise. Almost every member of the crew behaves like an idiot during the episode, failing to grasp what the audience quickly foresees: that tribbles reproduce too quickly not to become a problem within enclosed, predator-less environments like a spaceship or a space station. In the narrative, this is somewhat justified by the claim that tribbles’ purring has a “calming” effect on humans’ nervous system: perhaps the calming effect is so powerful that those affected by it are lulled into major failures of reasoning and foresight. However, the effect of the presence of tribbles on the crew spreads quickly, as if an obsession with tribbles “infects” the entire crew. The infestation of the ship—and of the minds of the crew—seems complete when Kirk enters the bridge and discovers countless tribbles perched on every available surface. He orders select crewmembers to deal with the problem, and is forced to insist (more than once) that he wants the tribbles off the ship.

On the other hand, Kirk struggles with those who hold more power than himself. For example, the undersecretary Nils Baris—a high-ranking government official—demands that Kirk assign a significant

number of guards to watch the quadro-tritcale stores on the space station where the Enterprise has docked.

Kirk, baffled, struggles to accept that this work is necessary, even after the importance of the grain store is explained to him both by his the undersecretary and by his own science officer, Mr. Spock. He flouts authority as best he can while still nominally doing what he is told to do, carefully straddling the line separating obedience and defiance. For example, he assigns a minimum number of guards, insults the undersecretary, and complains about his orders even while carrying them out.

In the end, Kirk's stoic, manly demeanour is undone: he ends up chest-deep in a pile of dead tribbles who have consumed the grain, flustered beyond recognizability, as in the image to the left. It is only one of the challenges to Kirk's dignity: another is the insults offered him by the Klingon captain who has also



docked at the space station, and which his chief engineer explains (to Kirk's obvious disappointment) did *not* occasion the fight that followed. Bones explains that what started the fight was not the insults to Kirk, but the way the Klingons insulted the Starship Enterprise.

Kirk, in this episode, is a man pushed to the end of his rope, and indeed, he fails to save the day in his usual manner. The only reason Kirk isn't held responsible for the loss of the quadrotritcale is because it turns out the grain was poisoned, by none other than Nilsz Baris' assistant, a secret Klingon. Whatever parallels one might make with American Cold War paranoia—the assistant being a secret communist, the Klingons standing in for the menace of Soviet Russia—can, however, only distract us from what makes this episode so interesting within the history of the original series Star Trek episodes: Kirk's inefficacy as a captain.

One way we can read this inefficacy is to understand that *Star Trek* is not really about space travel at all. The *Starship Enterprise* is, rather, an idealized microcosm of the country that produced the show, a funhouse mirror reflection of America in the late 1960s. Although the period is distant to us now, it was a time of great turmoil, with social change accelerating at a bewildering pace. Young people—those in a “lower” position of authority in society—were embracing new and unusual ideas, fashions, music, language, and more. To middle-aged Americans, a lot of these social trends seemed bewildering and upsetting, rather like the spread of an infection, and not only that, an infection that seemed, from the point of view of the older generation, to reduce the sensible vigilance that had supposedly become normal in America. Instead of distrusting people of other races, younger Americans were mixing with them, sharing their narcotic cultures and fashion, sharing new (rock) music that did not seem sufficiently “white” or even “proper” to their parents. Just as the tribbles lulled the crew of the *Starship Enterprise* into a dangerous complacency regarding the infestation of their ship, the 1960s counter-culture seemed, from the point of view of older Americans, to lull young people into a similarly dangerous complacency with social changes that terrified their elders.

Kirk, then, is a man struggling for control of a “ship” that is already slipping out of control, but what he represents is a generation struggling with a nation that is slipping out of their supposed “control.” Young people not only are following radically different personal norms—free love, rock music, dropping out—but also pushing for a radically different social agenda, especially in their protests of the Vietnam War. To the older generation, opposition to Vietnam spread like tribbles—at first, quietly, but then with a suddenness and force that was both bewildering and alarming. For them, America was (like the *Starship Enterprise*) getting “out of control.”

It is no mistake that the figure who suffers most mightily in this shift is Captain Kirk: an authority figure, yes, but also literally the embodiment of the “old guard” in 1960s American culture: Kirk is a military man, a white and *very* heterosexual male of middle age. (He is famous for his many romantic encounters

with human and alien women throughout the series.) Kirk seems like the perfect stand-in for the older generation that struggled with a sense of confusion, panic, and frustration as it witnessed what seemed like American society falling apart around them. As SF author John Scalzi put it in 2012, in analogy with game difficult settings, “Straight White Male” is the “lowest difficulty mode” for living in American society... but it was far more difficult in 2012 than it had been in 1950, and the shift in privilege and authority really started to kick in around the time Star Trek was being filmed. If (white, middle-class) Americans were encouraged around the middle of the 20th century to see America as a utopian nation, its utopianism depended on having people who looked like them—namely, middle-aged white men—in charge of everything. Ironically, the utopianism of the youth counter-culture challenged this vision of a utopian America, and permanently shattered the idea that America had been utopian at all.

It is no surprise, then, when Kirk finds himself sulking and rebelling against undersecretary Nilsz Baris, humiliated as tribbles tumble out of the grain storage bay onto his head: Kirk is a symbol of a generation that suddenly found itself lost and unsure how to operate in a newly changed society. Kirk has lost control of his ship and his crew, and is no longer a “manly” and “powerful” captain in the way he was in most episodes. On one level, we could say he is no longer a “man” by the definition of manhood he himself believed, and his failure is ironically necessary too: if Kirk *had* managed to get the tribble population under control, the poisoned grain would not have been discovered and Klingons would have taken over the nearby planet after the human colonists died out. Kirk’s humiliation, then, represents the frustrated humiliation of a generation who found themselves in an America they could not recognize. The difference, however, is that in the show, order is restored and Kirk once again regains his position of authority and respect: this is fantasy, of a type that imagines utopia as a return to established order rather than as the result of social change—precisely the imagining that would flatter the sensibilities of a significant part of its audience.