The Nursing Profession in the Fictional Star Trek Future.
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Introduction
Since time immemorial, nurses worldwide have striven to establish nursing as a profession, autonomous but complementary with the medical profession. Although major strides have been achieved in the last three decades, fiction continues to show that the nurse is still a fiddle in the middle, subsumed by the doctor, blindly obeying orders and serving as liaison between medic and patient.

A brief overview of literature across periods as far back as the Renaissance demonstrates an overall derogatory attitude toward the nurse's role. While the extremist position of the nurse as witch, sorcerer and evil has been abandoned, it has been replaced by the Florence Nightingale image, a primary caregiver to the sick with a predominantly subservient role. The modern notion of the nurse working side by side with the medical practitioner in highly stressful and technical environments, with the ultimate goal to save lives, continues to be overshadowed by the heroic medical doctor. Even in science fiction (SF) literature, a genre considered avant-garde in its line of thought, the role of the nurse has never been given its proper place. Indeed, several SF book series concentrate exclusively on doctors, with the medical practitioner in question carrying out multiple roles of doctor, nurse researcher, engineer and even technician. For example, Murray Leinster’s *Med Ship* series features ‘Med Ship Man’ (Leinster), volunteer doctors similar to *Medicins Sans Frontieres* International who travel from world to world with no actual enforcement powers but who are so respected that their advice is never questioned (Grech).

In the television series, *Star Trek* (ST), the recurrently submissive role of the nurse is also very palpable. An American SF entertainment franchise created by Gene Roddenberry that first debuted in 1966, ST has become a “cult phenomenon” (Italie). ST has been acclaimed for prefiguring numerous innovative technological inventions, such as the cell phone. It has also been praised for progressive civil rights attitudes. The original series included a multi-racial cast and was hailed for pioneering and defending feminist rights while promoting equality amongst the mixed gender cast (Italie). However, the sad truth is otherwise for the nursing roles enacted.
For example, most of the nursing cast are only mentioned as missing in the Dominion War in Deep Space 9. Others, such as Bandee (Posey), Jabara (Badiyi) and Hortak (Brooks) make fleeting appearances showing in just one episode. These three nurses appeared in Deep Space Nine and served as medical assistants under Dr Julian Bashir (Berman and Piller).

Only Christine Chapel and Alyssa Ogawa were given prominence as nurses on board the Enterprise and their role will be examined in more detail.

**Christine Chapel**

Christine Chapel was a nurse aboard the USS Enterprise under the command of Captain James T. Kirk in 2266. Chapel's personal career was doomed from its initial stages. She abandoned a career in bioresearch for a position in Starfleet in the hope that she would one day reunite with her fiancé, Dr Roger Korby. It is depicted as if she made do with a nursing role in order to find her lost fiancé (Goldstone).

Serving as head nurse on the Enterprise under Chief Medical Officer Dr Leonard McCoy, Chapel is given a prominent position. Her capabilities and renowned expertise are acknowledged many times by Dr McCoy. On one particular occasion Dr McCoy complained to Kirk that “he had watched four of his best doctors and nurses, including Chapel” be imprisoned (Daniels). While enjoying a professional friendship with him, Chapel supports him in his decisions, even when others questioned his reliability. A case in point occurred when Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Scotty and Lieutenant Arlen Galway contracted a mysterious rapid aging syndrome. Chapel almost instinctively knew that McCoy would be able to figure out an antidote for the rapid aging syndrome. Her absolute faith in him was unshaken even while his wisdom was questioned by another doctor and a visiting Commodore (Pevney). She thus helped Dr McCoy in developing a medicine to cure mental degradation effects. In another episode, she also assisted Dr McCoy and Spock in the production and synthesis of an agent to counteract hyper-acceleration effects of Scolosian water (Taylor). Both episodes portray her excellent skills as a lab assistant.

Regardless of her expertise and excellent skills, nurse Chapel has been overshadowed all along by the heroic Dr McCoy. Even when she was recognised by Dr McCoy for a great idea to use the microscope laser in order to reset and heal a crewman's broken leg, her triumph was dampened. Chapel would be proven correct, but unfortunately she nearly drowned when she fell into the sick-bay’s aquarium (Sutherland).

It is also worth noting that even among fans of ST’s original series, Christine Chapel proved to be unpopular. Her professed love for Mr Spock did not go down well with both female and male fans: “I'm in love with you, Mr Spock. You, the human Mr Spock... the Vulcan Mr Spock...I see things... how honest you are...” (Pevney). Indeed, “[f]emale fans saw her as a threat to their own fantasies and male fans saw her as a threat to Spock's Vulcan Stoicism” (Gerrold 28).

At some point during her five year mission, Chapel returned to medical school in order to complete her medical degree. Chapel returned to the Enterprise as Chief Medical Officer. Dr McCoy’s comment to Kirk that he was “going to need a top nurse, not a doctor who will argue every little diagnosis with me” (Sutherland) effectively depicts doctor-nurse tension. McCoy did not want an equal who might have threatened his position. He wanted a highly skilled nurse with expertise who was not at par with his status and who did not have a say in his decision making. Even when she was a practising doctor, he still saw her as his inferior “passing on to her every duty he finds too boring, irritating or annoying to himself” (Sackett and Roddenberry 119). Whatever her cast role, Christine Chapel was doomed to subservience under Dr McCoy.

**Alyssa Ogawa**

Alyssa Ogawa was a Starfleet officer aboard the USS Enterprise – D and later, the USS Enterprise – E. She was one of the head nurses in the ship’s sickbay, assigned there in 2367 as an ensign. In 2370, upon recommendation by Dr Beverly Crusher, she was promoted to lieutenant junior grade. She became a senior staff member and would make reports to the senior staff in Crusher’s absence. This further perpetuates the subservient role of the nurse to the doctor and also reveals the inherent power of the medical doctor and the influence on decisions which were not related to her medical position per se.

Ogawa co-assisted Dr Crusher in several surgeries and medical situations. In “Identity Crisis” (Kolbe), she helped Crusher develop a way to stop the metamorphosis of aliens. In the same episode, Ogawa also assisted Dr Crusher in performing an autopsy.

Most of Ogawa’s interventions were more medically oriented than her nursing profession would usually allow. In the “Inner Light” (Lauretson), she brought medical equipment to the Enterprise bridge in order to monitor Picard’s condition while he was knocked un-
conscious, while in “Suspicions,” she helped investigate the mysterious deaths of two doctors (Bole). In an alternate reality, Ogawa was a doctor and chief medical officer (Weimer).

Ogawa’s loyalty and friendship toward Dr Crusher were highlighted in the episode “Suspicions” (Bole). Ogawa risked her own career when Dr Crusher was relieved of duty for performing an autopsy on Dr. Reyga, violating the Ferengi death ritual and the Prime Directive. When Crusher was unable to continue investigating because she was unable to access the needed autopsy files, Ogawa used her authorization to help Crusher access the files, realizing how important this was for Crusher.

Overall, the doctor-nurse relationship between Dr Crusher and Ogawa appears to shift toward a more multi-disciplinarian approach. There seems to be a marked improved difference from the explicitly subservient role evident in the McCoy-Chapel work relationship. A major influence could be Crusher and Ogawa’s personal friendship, shifting the balance in their place of work by making them more or less equal stakeholders in decision making and responsibilities.

Discussion

While nurses’ appearances in ST do not portray a role of servitude per se as was depicted in earlier literature periods, it still exposes an overall subservient attitude to the medical practitioner. This is most felt in McCoy-Chapel work relationship, with various derogatory comments issuing from Dr McCoy himself.

Chapel’s role was also fraught with difficulties. An issue which frustrated the show’s producers, notably Robert Justman, was that the character of Chapel was not “fleshed out” (Simpson 14). Justman also felt that “nurse Chapel was a wimpy badly written and ill-conceived character” (Solow and Justman 224-225). Even Majel Barrett, reprising the role of Chapel, expressed similar sentiments. She claimed, “I didn’t care that much for nurse Chapel, to tell you the truth. She really wasn’t that exciting a person or that exciting a character for an actress to play” (Curtis 39).

The glamorous, heroic and exciting life that is often associated with medical doctors is not seen in both Chapel’s and Ogawa’s roles in ST. This lacuna is also revealed in other literature and television series. The caring, compassionate, loyal female persona also emerges. The romantic involvement with other personnel on board the Enterprise other than the doctor is a displacement of a popular theme, a love relationship with the heroic doctor. Christine Chapel admits her love to Dr Spock (Pevney), while Ogawa ultimately married Lieutenant Andrew Powell (Beaumont), and later conceived a child (Carson).

While boasting of mixed gender and equality, ST remains conventional in its approach in portraying male doctors and female nurses. This parallels the predominant trend in real life, where nursing is viewed as a female based profession. The stereotypic nurse image – blonde attractive female, is also highlighted. Majel Barrett claims that she was delighted that in the Motion Picture (Wise), she was promoted to doctor. The role did not require of her to bleach her hair, as was requested of Nurse Chapel in The Original Series (Sackett and Roddenberry, 119).

The shift toward a more multi-disciplinary approach represented by Crusher and Ogawa also reflects the changing attitude of the general public toward nursing in today’s society. A century later in the ST timeline, Ogawa is given more autonomy and responsibility than her colleague.

All in all, ST remains avant-garde in its approach towards disease management, treatment and care. However the general concept of the nursing role remains – a role subsumed by and subservient to the medical doctor. Arguably, more could be done to enhance the role of the nurse as befits modern times.

Works Cited


