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Star Trek and the Modern Schizophrenic Attitude toward Ancient Rome

The ancient world has long been a source of inspiration for modern societies. Indeed, even modern conceptions of the future have often been influenced by interpretations of antiquity. Unfortunately, such interpretations are often incomplete, conflicting, or even self-servingly driven by modern ideological concerns. A case in point is the 1960s science fiction television series, *Star Trek*. This paper will examine how this popular and influential series embodies and perpetuates modern confusion about the ancient world, particularly in its schizophrenic depiction of the ethos of ancient Rome.

The Rome of *Star Trek* and the popular imagination tends to be either the martial, yet honorable, society of the early Republic or the wealthy and decadent society of the early Empire. In the series, the choice of stereotype is determined solely on the basis of a particular episode's thematic ideology. Two episodes which draw heavily on perceptions of ancient Rome, "Balance of Terror" and "Bread and Circuses," illustrate this point.

In "Balance of Terror" an alien race known as the "Romulans" are patterned on the Romans of the early Republic in order to serve a theme which is critical of U.S.-Soviet antagonism during the Cold War. The series' 1960s liberal political ideology required that the Romulans be not only futuristic counterparts of the belligerent Soviets, but also an honorable people worthy of respect and peaceful coexistence. Thus, the stereotypical Romans of the early Republic were chosen as the ideal pattern on which to model the Romulans.

In "Bread and Circuses," on the other hand, an alien people are depicted as the Romans of the early Empire to serve a theme that suggests the triumph of Christian ideals is a universal phenomenon. The "children of the Son," as the Christian-like aliens are called, struggle to overcome their persecutors, who are now conveniently depicted as the stereotypically decadent Romans of the early Empire who put on brutal gladiatorial contests, enslave enemies, and feast lavishly in luxurious villas.

Such conflicting interpretations of ancient Rome as seen in the science fiction of *Star Trek* abound throughout the popular imagination, in which case the choice of stereotype is similarly determined by ideological concerns, whether they be those of George Washington, who idolized such noble Republican Romans as Cincinnatus and Fabius, the archetypal farmer-soldiers, or of the films, *Quo Vadis* and *Ben Hur*, which vilified the decadent Imperial Romans who persecuted Christians and Jews, or even of the recent film, *Gladiator*, which cannot fathom an Imperial hero unless he rewrites history and restores the Republic in A.D. 180! But in neither *Star Trek* nor the popular imagination is there any attempt to resolve the apparent conflict between these two stereotypes or to consider the complex factors that determined the Roman ethos at any given time in its long history. Thus, all that remains is a conflicted, schizophrenic, understanding of ancient Rome--inaccurate and incomplete, but conveniently ready to serve whatever purpose a modern ideology might require.