

## Disputation CCXII

February 6, 2020

Dear Peucinians,

After a rousing opener for the semester, we boldly proclaimed “down with the meritocracy!” This week, we shall examine another belief which may help or hinder progress along the way to virtue. With American heroes quite literally falling from the sky these days, we would do well to consider whether these idols should hover so over our lives in the first place.

I can think of no better way to introduce this week’s topic than a quotation from Plutarch, the chronicler of ancient heroes. He remains, perhaps, the greatest biographer of the Western tradition (sorry, Boswell), and his *Lives* are a veritable trove of inspiration. He writes:

For it does not necessarily follow, that, if a piece of work please for its gracefulness, therefore he that wrought it deserves our admiration... But virtue, by the bare statement of its actions, can so affect men’s minds as to create at once both admiration of the things done and a desire to imitate the doers of them.

*The Life of Pericles* (trans. Dryden)

### **RESOLVED: KILL OUR HEROES**

**Affirmative: Count Leo Tolstoy ’22**

**Negative: St. Oscar Romero ’22**

As individuals and a collective, we mythologize and idealize great people over and above their actual character. This practice sets before us unattainable goals, and can trap one in a state of inferiority. So often, all we see of the best artists is their gloriously refined final editions. They appear as natural born gods, with personal struggles against mediocrity, all they had to learn and overcome, and all their terrible drafts removed from sight. If we demystify our idols, and understand their virtues in the context of a flawed and realistic human life, they become better models for improvement. Furthermore, it is quite unhealthy to worship other human beings, and you need look no further than the cult of American celebrity for a plainly disturbing marriage of alienation and obsession.

Yet, there is something to our tendency to weave fabulous tales—something which ennobles the mind and spirit. When we profane our idols, we lower the horizon of human inspiration and achievement. Heroes help you recall the practice of virtue in actual scenarios, and can prompt you to stand firm even against long odds. Also, this sense of reverence for others leads us outside of ourselves. Stories are the best means of convincing souls of the good, and societies which maintain common models of excellence and wonder are much more inclined to peace and harmony.

I shall leave you with a final image: this one of Julius Caesar, early in his career, and serving as governor of Spain. He comes upon a statue of Alexander the Great: whose reputation has carried him even here to this far-flung corner of the known world. Caesar breaks down and weeps. He realizes he is now as old as Alexander was at the time of his death, and is ashamed of how little he has accomplished in the same space of time.

Is this incredible? Is this pathetic? What have you been doing with your time? Whatever that is, I hope you will choose to spend it with us tomorrow!

**Thursday, February 6th, 7:45 PM**  
**Massachusetts Hall, Third Floor\***  
**Semi-Formal Attire**

Sincerely yours,

✍️

Gilgamesh

*Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus*

\* This room can be reached only by stairs. Please contact me if you wish to attend and this presents a difficulty for you.