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Robinson College Chapel Address: Counter-Cultural Heroes

The most difficult part of beginning to write a speech is just in fact that, writing the beginning. There are expectations about what the introduction should contain, usually some sort of engaging hook that will grab your attention, generally an astonishing fact or a quote from someone at the upper echelons of society. You, as the audience, might then be expecting me to use the hook as a segue into which I will present my thesis for the evening. But what happens when those expectations aren't met? What happens when those cultural norms aren't followed to a tee? What happens if I don't start off with a hook? Have I lost you all already and have you all already begun to fantasize about the wine and crisps that will tantalize your tongue in a few short moments? I sincerely hope not, as that was not my intent. My hope is that this take on an introduction was sufficiently meta enough to keep you engaged, enough to get you thinking about why we do the things we do in the particular way we do them, about why we take such expectations as a given.

Keeping this idea of cultural expectations in mind, let us now turn our attention to the theme for this term, heroes. If you recall from last week, we heard a wonderful address on King Arthur and his exploits. It was mentioned as a bit of an aside, but we were briefly told of Sir Galahad the Pure, who was so successful to the point where the history that surrounds him is borderline boring. If Galahad set out on a quest, it was a given that he would attain his objective. In a way, Galahad is what we might have called a knight in shining armor, heroic, altruistic, riding on a noble steed whilst vanquishing evil from the land. We might even be tempted to

begin to think of Galahad as something of a Prince Charming because he was so adept at satisfying the cultural expectations that were befitting of a knight.

So now I ask you, when you think of the word hero, what do you think of? Does it bring to mind someone who is particularly fit, usually in skin-tight spandex with a flowing cape? Is this character usually endowed with some superhuman abilities, say extreme strength or flight? If this is what you thought of, you most likely are not alone. Our society is inundated with the superhero genre, with at least 3 Marvel movies coming out per year, not to mention spin off shows and films produced by other studios. Needless to say, the ubiquity of the genre has led to us forming these notions of what a hero should be, and on the contrary, what is not a hero. But what happens when a hero comes along who doesn't exactly meet those cultural expectations we hold? What happens when we encounter a counter-cultural hero?

I'd like to explore just that this evening, the idea of a counter-cultural hero, the hero who achieves their objection but perhaps doesn't fit the bill otherwise. Let us now turn our attention to the one, the only, Shrek. My hope is that you are a little surprised by that, that the idea of Shrek as a hero is something you hadn't really considered before and that, well, he isn't really what you think of when you think of a hero. Good, that's kind of the point.

Besides our expectations being cultural, they are also contextual. Given that Shrek falls in the fantasy genre, our expectations of him are a bit different than that of the protagonist in say an Indie film. When it comes to a fantasy film set in the middle ages, we would expect the hero to be a Sir Galahad/Prince Charming type. For there to be a prince generally requires that he be the son of a king, meaning the prince comes from some notable status. Furthermore, a prince is usually portrayed as handsome, tall, sculpted body shielded by a polished suit of armor, charging toward the castle on his perfectly groomed and similarly armored noble steed. In fact, this is

precisely how the second Shrek film picks up. But the first does not begin in this culturally expectable way, no the first film in the franchise begins with Shrek tearing a page out of a fairytale story book and using it to clean himself after using the restroom, a sure sign that this film was not going to conform to the confines of its genre.

Beginning with the glaringly obvious, he is an ogre! The type of beast who is usually hunted down and killed turns out to be our hero. Instead of living in a castle with other members of society, our hero lives alone in a swamp, ideally as far away from other people as possible. He is what we might call a social reject because he is not a human being willing to live within the confines of civilized life, instead being banished to his swamp and becoming something of a social recluse. Whereas we usually see princes as manicured and mannered, Shrek is the opposite, showering with mud, eating bugs with his stained crooked teeth and doing what a knight would never dream of doing in front of a lady, passing gas. Instead of having a noble steed that transports him speedily from A to B, he is instead accompanied by a talking donkey who only seems to take Shrek from his usual state of apathy to extreme frustration. Even the way he goes about rescuing Princess Fiona is uncouth, failing to follow the prescribed order of operations of first slaying the fire-breathing dragon, ascending to the highest room in the highest tower, and awakening Fiona with a kiss. Instead, he uses Donkey to distract the dragon, comes crashing through the ceiling of her chamber and in lieu of kissing her, shakes her like a rag doll. And as if these implicit contrasts were not enough, Fiona comes right out and says what we are all thinking at this point, “but this isn’t right, you aren’t what I expected!” There we have it, an explicit statement that Shrek does not meet the cultural expectations of what is befitting of a hero, and yet, he breaks the genre by being victorious over Farquaad and being the one with the happily ever after. Truly the unlikeliest of heroes.

Is there perhaps another character who did not fit their cultures expectations of them? Sort of a “not the hero we wanted, but the hero we needed” type of situation? Perhaps this hero, like Shrek, was not born to a wealthy family in a castle, but instead this hero was born in a stable to temporarily nomadic parents who were avoiding the infanticide of a maniacal king, hardly the type of beginning we might expect of hero. Perhaps this hero came from a region that would have been the unlikeliest of places, a place that it was thought that nothing good could come out of, much the way one might doubt a hero would originate from a swamp. Perhaps this hero would be hated by those in power at his time and the vast majority of his words and actions would contradict those who held said power, but regardless of how they felt about him, he carried on toward his objective. Perhaps the victory that this hero set out to accomplish was so countercultural that it required a death that was unbecoming of a hero, that it didn’t come with a golden crown of jewels, but a crown of thorns, that this victory didn’t secure a vast earthly kingdom but established a heavenly kingdom which lasts unto eternity.

Perhaps a hero who doesn’t meet our expectations or even directly goes against them is the hero that we need, one who will deliver us from the brokenness of the here and now and bring us to a higher calling. Perhaps.