

**OUR HEROIC THEMES: A POEM
READ BEFORE THE PHI BETA
KAPPA SOCIETY OF HARVARD
UNIVERSITY, JULY 20, 1865**

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Our Heroic Themes: A Poem Read Before the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard University,
July 20, 1865 by George H. Boker

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GEORGE H. BOKER

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A POEM

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OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY,

JULY 20, 1865.

By GEORGE H. BOKER.



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OUR HEROIC THEMES.

TURN as I may in search of worthy themes,
To fill with life the poet's solemn dreams, —
Some hint from Rome, some retrospect of Greece,
Red with their war, or golden with their peace ;
Some thought of Lancelot and Guinevere,
The " arm in samite " and the " mystic mere " ;
Or those grand echoes that forever flow
From Roland's horn through narrow Roncesvaux ;
Some spark yet living of the strange romance
Whose flame illumined the Crusader's lance ;
Or that strong purpose which unclosed the seas
Before the vision of the Genoese ;
Or when the love-lock and the close-cropped crown
Died with a laugh, or triumphed with a frown ;
Or the frail Mayflower poured her prayerful flock

Upon the breast of Plymouth's wintry rock ;
Or when the children of these hardy men
Bearded the throne they never loved again ; —
Something I sought, whose wonted sound might call
Familiar echoes from this learned hall ;
But sought in vain. The Past, unreal and far,
Loomed through the dusty vapors of our war,
And what was clear before my boyish glance
Lost, for the man, its old significance.
Those splendid themes, so sacred to my youth, —
Those dreams of fancy with their heart of truth, —
Paled as I viewed them in the fresher rays
That light the scenes of these heroic days ;
Shrank, as the young Colossus of our age
With scornful finger turned the historic page,
And sought, through pygmy chiefs and pygmy wars,
To peer his stature and his dreadful scars ; —
Sought till a smile o'erran his studious frown,
Then razed the records as he wrote his own :
Matchless in grandeur, product of a cause

As deep and changeless as those moral laws
That base themselves upon the throne of God, —
Fair with His blessings, awful with His rod.
Find me in history, since Adam fell,
This story's rival or its parallel :
A nation rising to undo a wrong
Forged by itself, and to its mind made strong
By every word its angry tongue had hurled
In stout defiance at a sneering world.
Since Paul was stricken on Damascus' plain,
Brimming with mischief and contrivings vain,
And God's dread brightness sealed his mortal sight,
But fired his spirit with a heavenly light,
Such swift conversion has not entered in
The darkened vision of unconscious sin,
As when this nation, in its proudest glow,
Reeled, weak and blinded, with the sudden blow ;
But saw—thank God!—truth's inward ray make plain
The old delusions of its erring brain ;
And even as Paul, from Ananias' hands,

Received his vision and his Lord's commands,
So, changed and contrite, sank the Nation down
Before thy touch of glory, brave John Brown!

But why explore the sources of the flood,
Whence all the land ran steel and fire and blood?
My heart is fretting, like a tethered steed,
To join the hero in his noble deed.
A noise of armies gathers in my ears,
The Southern yells, the Northern battle-cheers;
The endless volleys, ceaseless as the roar
Of the vexed ocean brawling with its shore;
The groaning cannon, puffing at a breath
Man's shreds and fragments through the jaws of death;
The rush of horses, and the whirring sway
Of the keen sabre cleaving soul from clay;
And over all, intelligible and clear
As spoken language to a listening ear,
The trumpet orders the tumultuous herds,
And leads the flocks of battle with its words.

'T was mine to witness and to feel the shame
Manassas cast upon our early fame,
When the raw greenness of our boastful bands
Yielded a victory almost in their hands ;
Fled from the field before a vanquished foe,
And lied about it, to complete the woe.
Since then, through all the changes of the war,
My eyes have followed our ascending star.
Ascending ever, though at times the cloud
Of dark disaster casts its murky shroud
About our guide, oppressing men with fear
Lest the last day of liberty drew near ; —
Through all I knew, and with my faith upborne
Turned on the weak a smile of pitying scorn,
That our calm star still filled its destined place,
Lost to our sight, but shining in God's face.

With growing courage, day by day I hung
Above the soldier of the quiet tongue.
Sneers hissed about him, penmen fought his war :