“I AM BEOWULF!”:  THE FIGURE OF THE HERO IN BEOWULF

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“I Am Beowulf!”: The Figure of the Hero in *Beowulf*

During the first sixty seconds of Beowulf and Hrothgar’s initial meeting in Robert Zemeckis’ 2007 film *Beowulf*, the titular hero boldly declares “I am Beowulf!” and swears that he will defeat the monster Grendel that has been wreaking havoc in King Hrothgar’s mead hall Heorot. By this point in the movie, Beowulf has already explicitly identified himself on the shores of Daneland three times and will continue doing so, shouting his own name in triumph during both the sea monster sequence and the fight with Grendel. There is no question in the mind of the audience that Beowulf is the standalone hero of this story, with ties to king and country existing secondary to personal glory, if at all. He has swept in and conquered the monsters, and he dies a hero’s death alone at the film’s end.

Zemeckis’ film follows the poem’s plot more closely and completely than any of the other major *Beowulf* motion pictures to date, yet it still possesses multiple textual deviations from the original epic poem.¹ The most prominent divergence from the original text that all of these popular culture adaptations and appropriations share is that they present Beowulf as a singular hero concerned primarily with his own individual glory. Zemeckis’ film embodies this highly important alteration through the hero’s brazen statement: “I am Beowulf!” The rallying cry of personal power and glory is significantly at odds with Beowulf’s declarations of identity in the original poem. Upon landing on the shores of Daneland, Beowulf’s first introduction in the poem reads,

¹ Zemeckis’ film includes several events left out of other films, such as the swimming match against Breca, all three monster battles (Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon), and includes many secondary characters from the poem, but significantly alters moments from the text such as Hrothgar’s death, and the meeting between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother.
We belong by birth to the Geat people
and owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.
In his day, my father was a famous man,
a noble warrior-lord named Ecgtheow.

(lines 260-263)²

Eighty-three lines of poetry follow this introduction before Beowulf actually reveals his own name. In these eighty-three lines, Beowulf introduces himself as son of Ecgtheow, as a Geat in the service of king Hygelac, and as a warrior in the service of Hrothgar. Notably, he constructs an identity predicated on the community. He thus defines his identity—first and foremost—as part of the collective before defining himself as a warrior hero. This collective heroic identity is completely absent from the Zemeckis film, wherein Beowulf says his own name before naming anyone else. It is clear that the hero of the original poem is a hero of the collective—his identity is wrapped up in national identity and loyalty to his king and kin—while Zemeckis’ hero’s identity is centered around his own abilities.

What has changed in scholarship, politics, popular culture, and the field of heroic studies in the past millennia that has taken Beowulf from the hero of the collective, to the purely individualistic hero exemplified in Zemeckis’ film? This study traces the changes in western culture, scholarship, and popular culture that have created this individualized Beowulf as a representative of society’s heroic ideal. As the collective hero fell out of fashion, writers and filmmakers reacted to the changes in culture and scholarship and

² All quotations from the Beowulf poem are from Seamus Heaney’s translation unless otherwise noted.
reinvented representations of Beowulf as a hero that fit their own cultural ideals, making him a relevant and believable hero to new generations of Beowulf audiences and readers.

The Anglo-Saxon hero of the Beowulf poem embraced his culture’s emphasis on loyalty, both to lord and lineage. Heroic deeds were performed in the service of a king, and although the hero could show pride in his accomplishments, he would combine this personal pride with humble loyalty to his king. Yet, the changes to the notion of heroism that have occurred in western culture since the writing of the Beowulf manuscript depict a radical shift from this hero of the collective, to the staunchly individualistic hero, divorced from any governmental and political ties. In order to keep up with changing societal ideals and continue to fulfill the role of hero in these modern retellings, the depiction of Beowulf has had to shift and comply with the latest heroic ideals as well.

Twentieth and twenty-first century western culture (especially social norms, politics, and popular culture mediums like literature and film) has particularly seen the glorification of the individual hero figure, to which the Beowulf in Zemeckis’ film has conformed. The impact of Beowulf scholarship dealing with the Christian influences in the poem, J.R.R. Tolkien’s praise of the poem’s supernatural elements, the rise of the cowboy film hero of the 1940s and 50s, and the loss of faith in the government in western cultures during the 60s and 70s, have all led to glorified individualism. While these shifts toward the individualized hero occurred in western culture, Beowulf scholarship also began trending towards individualism. Scholars steered away from historical accounts and lineage to focus on monsters, and they twisted the sincerity of Beowulf’s unbending loyalty by wrestling with debates about the poem’s Christian, Pagan, and Secular qualities. The result of these trends has lead to an individualistic version of Beowulf. In these new
literary and pop culture adaptations of the Beowulf story the influence of this shift becomes evident, culminating in Zemeckis’ radically individual Beowulf shouting, “I am Beowulf!”

The Medieval Anglo-Saxon Hero and Beowulf

The Anglo-Saxon period, roughly from 500 CE to 1066 CE, was most certainly a warrior-based society, with strict social structures and practices. Social hierarchy was firmly in place, with the king presiding over his people, functioning as “the source of food, drink, and treasure [. . . and as] the protector of his people” (Halverson 594). Rigid laws even controlled wergild or blood-price, setting the monetary value of a person’s life. Should a person be killed, those at fault for the death would have to pay the family of the deceased a set amount, with “heavy penalties [enforced] if privileges were abused” (Loyn 48). This concept of blood-price recognizes the value of an individual as a contributing part of society; his communal worth, particularly as a warrior, must be replaced monetarily at his death in order to compensate for the community’s loss. In addition to these laws over the financial value of a person, Anglo-Saxon society followed a clear social order and etiquette that William Lawrence describes as,

Highly formal [. . . and] hedged about by rigid taboos and conventions. Its insistence upon etiquette was as great as that at the court of Queen Elizabeth; its conceptions of duty as rigid as those of the Puritans.

(Lawrence 5)

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3 Lloyd and Jennifer Laing examine the Sutton Hoo burial remains at the British Museum to formulate a description of the Anglo-Saxon warrior society in their 1979 book Anglo-Saxon England.
The *Beowulf* poem adheres to these societal rules and courtesies throughout its pages. Hrothgar must give permission for Beowulf to enter Heorot (ll. 386-387), attendants of a lower social class wait on the warriors at Heorot, and the Danes pay gold to the Geats for the blood-price of their kinsman who died at Grendel’s hand (ll. 1052-1054).\(^4\)

Amid these uncompromising social structures, the relationship between the king and his warriors is tantamount to this study. Loyalty held the king-warrior dynamic in place in Anglo-Saxon society. Lawrence explains that for warriors of this culture, “Strong bonds of personal loyalty bound them to the king; they were his chief supporters and advisers; they rendered him unquestioning allegiance” (Lawrence 51). In the poem, Beowulf makes it clear that his heroic feats are done for the glory of his king. This is particularly explicit when Beowulf refuses to use weapons in his battle with Grendel in order to “heighten Hygelac’s fame/ and to gladden his heart” (lines 485-486). Yet, through Beowulf’s unwavering loyalty to his king Hygelac, the poem reveals the advantages to loyalty as well. Indeed, Beowulf is loyal both while in Daneland—to his temporary lord Hrothgar—and once he returns to Hygelac’s court. By adhering to the system in his loyalty to Hygelac and Hrothgar Beowulf gains personal glory and wealth. This is because, as Scott Gwara describes, the dynamic between king and warrior is a vertical one,

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\text{in which retainers in the warband owed service to a king who rewarded them for loyalty [. . .] While it is true that a Germanic warrior seeks}
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\(^4\) Jackson goes into detail in *The Hero and the King* about the “highly conventional reception” that Beowulf receives even while precautions were being taken by the guard in case Beowulf was there to challenge Hrothgar.

\(^5\) In discussing the central role of the king, John Halverson cites the different stages Beowulf goes through before being able to approach Hrothgar himself.
status—the honors attached to gifts and the glory of reputation—as a member of a retinue, he ultimately answers to the king’s ambition. In fact, he earns honor primarily by being “hold” or “loyal.” But because glory drives the economy of heroism, however, thanes have a right to earn status. In this *quid pro quo*, the king’s wishes must accommodate his men’s inclinations and abilities, and his own ambition has to be tempered by institutions emphasizing reciprocity, especially gift-giving. The king’s men will fight *more willingly* for his causes in recognition of mutual obligations.

(Gwara 43)

Lloyd and Jennifer Laing also comment on the quid pro quo loyalty dynamics of Anglo-Saxon society, explaining that armies of this society “were organized on a basis of personal loyalty, with as its nucleus the war band of the chief. In return for their [the warriors’] loyalty the chief rewarded his followers with weapons, gold rings, feasts and drink” (Laing 56). It is important to emphasize this quid pro quo loyalty in relationship to the *Beowulf* poem. Beowulf serves Hrothgar, Hrothgar then showers Beowulf with gifts after he kills Grendel, and Beowulf in turn presents the most glorious gift of the golden torque to Hygelac—the man who Beowulf will ultimately succeed as king of the Geats. Thus, indirectly and eventually, Beowulf himself receives a reward. Accordingly, such loyalty was rooted not in fear, but in reciprocation that trickled down through the ranks and toward the hero. *Loyalty* in this society was beneficial to both king and warrior alike, as the *Beowulf* poem clearly displays.
What ultimately comes out of this Anglo-Saxon dynamic of king and warrior hero is the notion of the collective hero. While the hero accomplishes individual feats, the societal structure connects the hero and the actions that define him to his king, and it connects the king to his people as a nation. Because the hero is one of the king’s subjects, the hero can only successfully function as a part of a collective. In a society of quid pro quo loyalty, more is gained from being a part of the collective than from remaining an unassociated individual. The society itself affirms this positive collective community by providing, as John Halverson puts it, “the pleasures of human companionship [. . .] enjoyed in the feasting and drinking, in the sharing of treasure, in talking, in the playing of the harp and the reciting of old tales” (Halverson 601).

In addition to the socio-political relationship between king and hero, lineage and familial relations were necessary to heroic success in *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon culture as cornerstones of the collective society. These societal traits further the notion that even before becoming a hero, Beowulf’s existence was not solely individual, but part of a nationality and family line. On the most basic level, societal codes required warrior heroes to be of noble birth. As Lawrence explains it, “Nobility depended upon birth—a respectable family tree was as necessary to a warrior as his sword” (Lawrence 51). The Laings explain that the most treasured possession of the warrior was his sword, and this object of immeasurable importance was handed down from father to son (Laing 54). Literally the tools which made one a warrior were handed down through the family line. Alongside his sword, the warrior also received his reputation from his family, as it was handed down from father to son in each generation. Longstanding nobility in one’s family meant an established connection between the family and the line of kingship.
Beowulf’s entrance into Heorot and the audience of Hrothgar hinges on the hero’s lineage. Lines 391-394, the announcement to Beowulf that he may enter Heorot, reveal that Hrothgar’s decision to let the strange men enter was based on his knowledge of Beowulf’s family:

My lord, the conquering king of the Danes
bids me announce that he knows your ancestry;
also that he welcomes you here to Heorot
and salutes your arrival from across the sea.

(lines 391-394)

It is significant that the messenger Wulfgar mentions Hrothgar’s knowledge of Beowulf’s ancestry in this announcement. It is not new information, but repeated, signaling that this information—Hrothgar’s knowledge of Beowulf’s lineage—would be important to Beowulf. What is left out in the announcement to Beowulf is that Hrothgar already knows of Beowulf’s prowess as a warrior; this implies that it is Beowulf’s ancestry and not his reputation that is most important at this moment. Shortly before this announcement, Hrothgar himself explains that he knew of Beowulf’s heroic qualities. But in Hrothgar’s speech Beowulf’s traits are given an equal amount of emphasis as Hrothgar’s knowledge of his parents:

I used to know him when he was a young boy.

His father before him was called Ecgtheow.

Hrethel the Geat gave Ecgtheow
his daughter in marriage. This man is their son,
here to follow up an old friendship.
A crew of seamen who sailed for me once
with a gift-cargo across to Geatland
returned with marvellous tales about him:
a thane, they declared, with the strength of thirty
in the grip of each hand.

(ll. 372- 381)

Because of the social structure of Anglo-Saxon society, a person’s family is what made him able to become a hero. Nobility was a prerequisite to warrior status and the first step to becoming a hero. Additionally, a lineage consisting of other warrior heroes gave one the familial reputation of being a successful warrior. Beowulf’s reputation is strengthened by Hrothgar’s familiarity with his parents, and his noble birth is what gave him the opportunity to achieve such a reputation. Without it, he could not even enter Daneland.

On a deeper level, the importance of kinship as a part of the social structure is highlighted in Beowulf. The opening of the poem recounts the lineage of Shield Sheafson before introducing the action of the poem that includes Beowulf. From the very first lines then, the reader is clued in to the importance of lineage and familial connections. Beowulf’s kinship ties are also repeatedly given significance in the poem. In The World of “Beowulf” Halverson discusses that,

The role of kinship groups in the development of medieval forms of social organization was fundamental. . . The most edifying personal associations in Beowulf, those the hero has with Hrothgar, Hygelac, and Wiglaf, find expression in the family relationship. Wiglaf and Hygelac are both blood
relatives to Beowulf, and Hrothgar’s highest tribute to the hero is to adopt him as a son.

(Halverson 596)

The close ties of kinship that drive both the narrative of *Beowulf*, as well as the older histories recounted in the poem, speak to how collectively driven Anglo-Saxon society was. The successful hero of Anglo-Saxon society was the collective hero, and to be a hero of the collective he must wholly and primarily be a part of the collective. The Beowulf in the poem could not have been a successful hero without being a part of this collective, acting in accordance with the social structures and systems. It is clear from the examples above that Beowulf embraced these collective ideals of his society. His lineage, kinship, and loyalty to his king propelled his desire for heroic adventures just as strongly as his desire for personal glory.

While Anglo-Saxon society was clearly a communal society longing for the collective warrior hero in times of need, further cultural eras have drifted away from this model. Instead of embracing strong kinship ties and an unwavering loyalty to his leader, the individual hero privileges acting of his own accord. Several centuries elapsed between the Anglo-Saxon period and the twentieth century, and this study will pick up its examination of Beowulf and heroism with two movements in Beowulf scholarship that have contributed to Beowulf’s more singular heroic identity.
The “Christian versus Pagan” Debate

Beginning around the 1890s, medieval scholarship increasingly debated the presence of Christian influences in the *Beowulf* poem. Critics noted several instances where a Pagan society (the Danes) referred to Christian figures, beliefs, and practices. Yet lines 180-183 of the poem explain that the Danes had not yet been exposed to Christianity:

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The Almighty Judge
of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of the Heavens and High King of the World,
was unknown to them.
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(lines 180-183)

These anachronistic Christian elements point to a poet who was Christian or “familiar with, but not necessarily steeped in, Christian doctrine” and was re-telling an older pre-Christian story (Gwara 3). This view raises more questions about the Christian versus pagan dynamic in the poem. Most relevant to this study are the resulting questions about Beowulf’s motivations. In the Germanic heroic tradition present in pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon society, known primarily from Tacitus’s observations in *Germania*, a hero’s pride was a part of his character, and he was “under constant obligation to demonstrate [his] superior courage” (Renoir 15). Pride in this society was just as important as loyalty and

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6 For the purposes of the this study my use of the word Pagan here refers to Edward B. Irving Jr.’s definition: “the actual practices and beliefs of a pre-Christian religion in which Germanic peoples participated” (Irving 177).

7 Scott Gwara lists some of these Christian elements: references to a great flood, the relation of Grendel to Cain, and several phrases which have been translated as “almighty God,” etc.
courtesy because it urged a man to act on behalf of his liege lord. However, as twentieth-century scholars point out, the Christian tradition looks upon pride in an exclusively negative light, since all glory is to be given to God instead of man—a divine Lord versus a human lord. Edward B. Irving Jr. notes that “in certain strict Christian contexts [. . .] these secular virtues can be seen as vices: especially pride in the frank display of strength” (Irving 180). As a result, the Christian scholars examining Beowulf began asking: were Beowulf’s motivations grounded in heroic pride or vainglory?

As Scott Gwara comments in *Heroic Identity in the World of Beowulf*, this debate has had “no unconditional resolution” in today’s scholarship (Gwara 2). While several critics have embraced the blending of Christian and pagan virtues, others have rigidly and exclusively judged Beowulf with Christian virtues as a yardstick. In 1934, Arthur E. Du Bois accused Beowulf of the Christian sins of pride and avarice, and E.G. Stanley later supported this in 1963, writing that Beowulf is “all but flawless. His flaw[s] being . . . avarice and vainglory” (Irving 175, 182-183). Critic Margaret Goldsmith accused Beowulf of this reckless vainglorious pride in his ill-fated determination to fight the dragon alone in lines 2529-2537 (Irving 184). Irving explains the importance and severity of this view of Beowulf’s flaws, noting that this perspective “overshadows whatever pagan virtues the hero may have revealed; the fundamental verdict on Beowulf is crushingly negative” (Irving 183). The Anglo-Saxon virtues of loyalty and dedication to the collective, then, are eclipsed by this negative focus on Beowulf’s Christian flaws, singling Beowulf out as an individual and divorcing him from the collective society whose virtues he is upholding.
The Rise of the Fantastical Hero

While scholars continued to question the Christian influences in the *Beowulf* poem and their effects on Beowulf’s motivations, another movement led by J.R.R. Tolkien encouraged scholarly work to focus on the fantastical elements of the poem. Tolkien’s infamous lecture at the British Academy in 1936, “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,” directed scholarship away from loyalty and lineage and, instead, elevated Beowulf’s heroic battles with the monsters. Tolkien aimed to distance Beowulf scholarship from strictly historical studies in order to judge the poem for its timeless artistic value, an angle that has particular significance to the conclusion of this study.

Tolkien argued that “Beowulf is in fact so interesting as poetry, in places [the] poetry is so powerful, that this quite overshadows the historical content” (Tolkien 7). He considers the sections containing the monsters vital to the “underlying ideas of the poem, which give it its lofty tone and high seriousness” (Tolkien 19). The influence of this lecture, later published in a larger work of essays by Tolkien’s son Christopher, has become paramount in *Beowulf* scholarship. While Tolkien was not the first critic to give credence to the monsters, the strength of his argument made an impact on the academic world by stirring up considerably more critical interest in the issue than those who had previously made the same point.8

8 The introduction to Seamus Heaney’s *Beowulf* translation says that “Tolkien’s brilliant literary treatment changed the way the poem was valued and initiated a new era –and new terms –of appreciation” (Heaney xi). In Harold Bloom’s *Rebirth and Renewal*, Bloom comments that Tolkien’s work is not only “filled with keen insights about the poem, but it was also responsible for generating a renewal in Beowulf studies” (Bloom 35). Michael D. C. Drout delivers an overwhelmingly praise-driven description of Tolkien’s lecture in the *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, citing
Tolkien’s influence, then, has concentrated the praise for the poem in the monster battles, where Beowulf’s individual glory as a monster-fighter is most significant. The emphasis in these sections is not on Beowulf’s motivations for fighting or how he held the status of a Geat warrior in the first place, but is instead on Beowulf’s personal abilities as a fighter. Tolkien praises these moments of Beowulf singularly defeating monsters in combat, effectively drawing attention away from Beowulf’s background, loyalties and the sections of the poem containing the histories of other famous warrior heroes, Danish and Geatish lineages, and the lines of kingship. Without giving enough attention to these sections where connections to the hero of Anglo-Saxon society is revealed, it becomes easier to only see Beowulf fighting the monsters alone, engaged in one-on-one combat. This paints the picture of Beowulf as an individual hero, on his own quest for personal glory.

Tolkien’s emphasis makes it possible to tell the story of Beowulf without making connections to the collective society of the Anglo-Saxons. If the focus should be primarily on the monster battles as Tolkien claimed, then all that is needed is for Beowulf to show up, battle the as-yet-undefeated foe, and sail off again for more adventures. His loyalty and his lineage, essentially his past, are unnecessary for the battles to be won. This notion of a drifter hero, one who lacks a past, sweeps in to save the day before then drifting off again is common to the image of another type of cultural hero: the American cowboy.

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that “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics’ is the most important essay ever written about Beowulf*” (Drout 57).

9 Beowulf’s fights are primarily singular with the slight exception of Wiglaf coming to assist Beowulf at the end of the dragon fight.
The Hero of the Hollywood Western Film

Less than a decade after Tolkien’s lecture, cinema began inundating audiences with a type of hero who would further the rise of heroic individualism. Western genre films like *Stagecoach* (1939), *The Westerner* (1940), and *Red River* (1948) brought the image of the cowboy to the forefront of western heroic culture. The American cowboy has become an extremely recognizable figure thanks to his popularization in the Hollywood Western. Among numerous other critics, Marshall W. Fishwick considers the American cowboy to have attained mythological status. In his article, “The Cowboy: America’s Contribution to the World’s Mythology” Fishwick calls the cowboy the “hero type par excellence of twentieth-century America” (Fishwick 77). The image of the man with a horse, a gun, and a hat in a dusty frontier town has become an archetype in heroic mythology and cinema alike. One of the defining traits to this archetype, and the one most important to this study, is individualism. The Hollywood cowboy is one man separate from the collective; a loner. As Maxwell Wegman asserts, he embodies “manliness, freedom, and autonomy” (Wegman 8). In fact, it is hard to come by a description of the cowboy that does not highlight this trait. The cowboy is seemingly

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10 To differentiate between concepts, the film genre “Western” will be capitalized and the socio-geographical cultural group “western” will be in lowercase.

11 Rita Parks in *The Western Hero in Film and Television: Mass Media Mythology*, “Tradition paints the Western hero as, first and possibly foremost, a loner” p. 56; Janice Hocker Rushing in “The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth”, “To cope with the harshness and savagery of the frontier environment, he must above all be a rugged individualist” p. 16; William W. Savage Jr. in *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* describes the cowboy as “a rugged individualist, an outsider” p. 141; and Emanuel Levy discussing John Wayne, “Wayne’s heroes are highly individualistic, often alienated from society and unable to conform to its norms. His most powerful
autonomous; while often rescuing a collective as the result of his heroic actions, he is not operating within the collective but separate from it.

This figure of the individual hero often operates as a vigilante, who acts outside of government, politics, and society, with his own moral code. Frequently, he acts as an outsider because the established governmental system has failed in some way to protect its people. A far cry from the warrior who lives within the regulated societal structures of Anglo-Saxon society, the Hollywood cowboy hero rejected any ties to a collective structure. His ties to kinship and lineage as well were minimal if existent at all. In the film *Shane* (1953), for example, the hero’s relations and background are never revealed, and he limits his identity to the enigmatically singular name “Shane.” Hollywood Westerns have many identifiable tropes, one of the most common being the heroic, mysterious loner.\(^{12}\) This hero rejects ties to a nationality, family, or any established collective identity. Films such as *Shane* and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) represented their heroes as this proverbial cowboy: breezing into town on his horse to save the day and then riding off into the sunset after the adventure was over. This hero consciously chose to live and operate outside of society.

The loner cowboy is such a powerful heroic archetype in western pop culture that it has significantly shaped the individualistic *Beowulf* adaptations of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. Such loner cowboy elements are extremely prevalent in modern *Beowulf* adaptations. This is explicit and even overstated in Graham Baker’s

\(^{12}\) AMC’s filmcritic.com feature on Western tropes describes these loners as men who “ride through town on a solitary horse. Ask them where they’re from? ‘Around.’” (filmcritic.com).
1999 film *Beowulf*, where Beowulf arrives at Heorot alone on horseback and literally rides off into the sunset at the film’s conclusion. What is vital to note at this point of the study however, is the impact of the Hollywood cowboy on the image of the hero. It is no doubt that the cowboy is a figure of the American hero, and Hollywood’s success with the Western genre only solidified the cowboy hero imagery from the “white hat/black hat” binary to the silhouette of a man riding off into the sunset on his horse. The American cowboy is a staple of Hollywood heroes, and since most of the latest *Beowulf* adaptations have come out of Hollywood themselves, the adaptations could not escape this cowboy influence from the studios that produced them.

While Hollywood was busy marketing the American cowboy during the 1950s and 60s, American and much of western culture was experiencing a change in its perception of the hero off of the silver screen. This was not accidental. Political turmoil and a growing distrust in government was once again severing the ties between the hero and the collective.

**Flawed Heroes of the 1960s and 70s and the Loss of Faith in Government**

The 1960s marked the rise of a very suspicious view of government by American society. As Janice Hocker Rushing points out, “The late sixties, as everyone knows, was one of the most politically volatile eras in American history” (Rushing 21). The infamous and incredibly impactful controversies sparked by the war in Vietnam began to shatter the image of America’s government as the world’s hero in upholding democracy. Instead of unwavering loyalty to the government and its decisions, Americans began to pull away from and oppose the government. In a study on trust in government, Luke
Keele presents the statistics tracing the shift in levels of governmental trust: “From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, trust in government in the United States fell precipitously, declining by over 30 points” (Keele 241). A similar study by Russell J. Dalton affirms these results and elaborates on the relation of the decline to specific events.

During the last third of the twentieth century, public trust in government and political institutions eroded in almost all advanced industrial democracies [. . .] Beginning with the crises and political scandals of the 1960s and 1970s—Vietnam, urban unrest, and Watergate—-Americans trust in their politicians sank steadily lower. (Dalton 133)

In addition to distrust in the government as a whole, the 60s and 70s also showed a movement towards the portrayal of American leaders as flawed heroes. James Combs attributes this interest in more humanized figures to the “failure of Presidential leadership since Kennedy,” with the Watergate scandal that stretched from 1972 to 1974 presenting the most influential of these failures (Combs 10). Richard Nixon’s resignation brought down the American Presidency from its pedestal of almost superhuman heroism, to the realization that Presidents were flawed individuals. During the 1970s there was a surge in movie and television biographies dealing with recent historical personalities that showed the “human” side of these, most often, men. Aspects of these figures’ lives that society considered flaws were suddenly broadcast into the homes across America, and Americans became aware that “FDR had a liaison with Lucy Mercer Rutherford, Eisenhower smoked heavily, Truman drank and played poker with his cronies, [and] Patton believed in reincarnation” (Combs 11). Much in the way that Beowulf scholars interested in the Christian influences in the poem brought Beowulf’s pride to the
foreground of their arguments as his flaw, these biographies brought the flaws of political heroes to the forefront.

These influences on heroes in western culture, the breakdown of the quid pro quo establishment between the “warriors” (soldiers) and the “king” (government), and increasing public interest in discovering the flaws in a hero, function in tandem with the shifts in heroism and *Beowulf* scholarship discussed earlier. The hero has become highly individualized through society’s desire to discover his flaws. The Christian virtue yardstick with which Beowulf has been measured treats his pride as vainglorious, having nothing to do with his role in the collective society; meanwhile, today’s political heroes stray away from the image of the collective hero by falling short of several of society’s standards, pushing them out of and away from the ideal for the collective. Interest in the lone fighter battling single-handedly against a foe seen in Tolkien’s work and the Western cowboy have taken hold of western culture, replacing real-life heroes who are prone to human failure or are connected to the wrong institution. Heroes are not perceived as heroic if they are aligned with an evil entity, thus heroes became disconnected from government in the 60s and 70s. A hero of this society then operates outside of the political governing force, just as the cowboy hero did. A hero becomes associated with the status of vigilante and he no longer has to answer to anyone, especially a government that is now perceived as corrupt and bad. These influences that have shaped the society have lead to the representation of the individualized Beowulf seen in late twentieth and twenty-first century pop culture.

**The Pop Culture Beowulf**
Medievalism, as the appearance and appropriation of medieval themes and characters in post-medieval texts, has been around for centuries, but in particular the presence of medievalism in relatively new media (film, TV, and the internet) has been abundant. One has only to look as far as Dungeons and Dragons®, Monty Python on the Holy Grail (1975), and the BBC’s Merlin for evidence as to how prevalent medievalism is in these relatively new genres. The rise of twentieth-century medievalism brought with it adaptations and appropriations of the Beowulf poem across this range of genres.\textsuperscript{13} Television shows such as Star Trek and Xena: Warrior Princess included the character Beowulf into the arc of several episodes, while books like Michael Crichton’s 1976 Eaters of the Dead and John Gardner’s 1971 Grendel retold the Beowulf epic from new perspectives. Similarly, films including Zemeckis’ and Baker’s works adapted the story of Beowulf for the screen.\textsuperscript{14} Beowulf’s presence in these new texts provides evidence that he remains a heroic figure outside of Anglo-Saxon society. There is something about Beowulf that has survived the test of time, but have all of the heroic attributes of the poem’s Beowulf been preserved in these new forms? Or have only select elements been appropriated into these new texts in order to reflect societal standards for a hero today? I contend that the elements of Beowulf that have been used in these adaptations and rewritings are the elements that I have recounted earlier in this study: pride and monster fighting. Not surprisingly, these characteristics are commonly found in today’s pop

\textsuperscript{13} Maria Jose Gomez-Calderon calls this rise of medievalism “‘medieval fashion’ that has lately become trendy in western societies” (Gomez-Calderon 991).

culture heroes who were introduced within the ideals of today’s society.\textsuperscript{15} The emphasis on epic battles and boastful statements connects Beowulf to these newer heroes, while other elements of the poem have been modified or eliminated to fit the current society’s vision of the hero.

While the treatment of the *Beowulf* poem is vastly different in each of these new texts, all of them depict a starkly individualistic Beowulf. Gone are the collective ideals of Anglo-Saxon culture, even in those works which portray that historical period. The historically centered sections of the poem that Tolkien argued were not as important as the battles are completely absent from any of the adaptations. There is no mention of the history of Danish kings or of Shield Sheafson whose legend opens the poem. Beowulf’s lineage is only briefly mentioned in one of the adaptations, and is only a cursory part of Hrothgar’s drunken ramble in Heorot.\textsuperscript{16} The emphasis is instead on the physical prowess, boastfulness, or strategic mental reasoning capabilities of Beowulf.

**Conclusion**

Hero stories reflect the ideals of a culture. Anglo-Saxon culture idealized the collective hero, and thus their Beowulf was only successful as a part of the collective society. His loyalty and dedication to his people and his lord allowed the society to accept him as a hero. As Anglo-Saxon society faded and other societal and cultural

\textsuperscript{15} Some examples of these heroes are Captain Jack Sparrow from *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), Indiana Jones from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), Iron Man from the comic book franchise of the same name, and Wolverine from the *X-Men* \textregistered franchise.

\textsuperscript{16} In Zemeckis’ film Hrothgar rambles to Beowulf about knowing his father and his prowess as a warrior.
values began to displace the hero of the collective, the representation of the hero transformed as well. As a hero whose legend outlived his society, the characterization of Beowulf was affected by these societal and cultural shifts found in scholarship, politics, and new forms of storytelling. Do these new texts create a “new” Beowulf? If one is approaching them from a standpoint outside of today’s culture, then yes. From the perspective of Anglo-Saxon culture these new texts have created a new Beowulf. The distinct elements and qualities that allowed Beowulf to become and embody the hero are what are left out in the new texts. As historical depictions, the texts inaccurately portray Beowulf as well as Anglo-Saxon society and heroics. But these books, films, and shows are not marketed as history lessons. While scholars may criticize and disagree with these representations of Beowulf, the texts have in fact made Beowulf relevant to today’s society.

To a contemporary audience, the vainglorious pride and monster fighting are what make Beowulf a hero. The other factors in the poem become irrelevant to a society where lineage and loyalty are not as important as individualism. Thus, to the modern audience the texts are not fundamentally changing Beowulf, but simply choosing not to include what they consider non-essential elements of the poem. In looking at the ways his students respond to heroes and heroism, Roger B. Rollin notes that the changes in the American socio-political climate have affected the relevance of older heroes. Writing in 1970, Rollin explains that his students are deeply concerned about the race problem in America or are involved in it, have fought in Vietnam or fought going there [. . .] For such students the
great old poems of the Anglo-Saxon scop, of Spenser, and of Milton may well seem not merely remote, but irrelevant. (Rollin 431)

Much in the same vein as Tolkien’s work, weeding out the older societal ideals in order to highlight Beowulf’s fighting and prideful attributes was and still is the way these new texts have connected the Anglo-Saxon hero to the modern audience and made him relevant.¹⁷

My conclusion then is twofold. On the one hand, as historical portrayals the new texts fail to depict accurate information. The Anglo-Saxon ideal of the collective hero is sacrificed on the altar of marketability to an audience who embraces an individualist hero. But as heroic texts of their time, the new books, films and TV show episodes successfully appropriate Beowulf into pop culture. Society’s ideals changed, and with them the representation of a beloved hero. The changes that have created the individualistic Beowulf of today’s pop culture reflect the ideals of twentieth and twenty-first century heroic ideals. The Beowulfs seen in these pop culture adaptations are only successful and believable as heroes because they embrace this society’s ideals for the hero. In order to enjoy the poem’s “timeless artistic value” Tolkien so admired, audiences first have to believe in the hero. Without believability, the emotional connection to the hero is lost, and the audience will quickly lose interest in the text as a whole. The only way for the media outlets producing these new texts to continue using the character of Beowulf is to present him as a believable hero that today’s audiences and consumers admire and trust. As the Beowulf in the Anglo-Saxon poem embraced the

¹⁷ Tolkien was pushing away from the historical reading of the poem, but he was not trying to make a “new” Beowulf. He wanted instead to focus on different qualities that made both Beowulf and the poem relevant to non-Anglo-Saxon audiences.
societal ideals of its time, these new texts present Beowulf as a hero comprehensible and relevant to today’s audiences.
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