

# **THERE WILL COME A TIME WHEN THE PEOPLE EXPECT WAR**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

There Will Come a Time When the People Expect War

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The goal of this thesis will be to conduct a survey of literature surrounding the *Beowulf* story and its many adaptations, specifically the ones relating to war and combat, for the purpose of determining how *Beowulf* adaptations reflect the increasingly complex nature of perceptions of and attitudes towards war throughout history. All too often, the martial aspects of *Beowulf* are dismissed as obvious and superficial, and scholars direct their efforts towards scouring the *Beowulf* story for more subtle subtext. However, the *Beowulf* story remains, at heart, a tale of soldiers and combat. This thesis will conduct a thorough investigation of *Beowulf* adaptations throughout history, from World War II to the Cold War (from both sides of the Iron Curtain) to modern adaptations that may yield insight into their creator's feelings towards Middle Eastern conflict. As the nature of war shifts from national, conventional combat to occupation and counter insurgency, the feelings regarding war of the countries in question change, and their *Beowulf* adaptations reflect those changes. What are these changes, and why is *Beowulf* so often chosen to convey messages about war?

## **Project Description**

This thesis was created to address the lack of scholarly work related to adaptations of *Beowulf* in wartime. It will consist of three body chapters, focusing on three periods of conflict: World War II, the Cold War, and modern Middle Eastern conflict. Each chapter will discuss relevant adaptations from the appropriate time period, including, but not limited to, book, film, and comic. To establish attitudes toward war during the three eras, every effort will be made to find relevant news coverage, opinion polls, books, etc. (such as a book about Cold War espionage between Russian and America, or a CNN opinion poll about the Iraq war, for example). “War” shall be defined as armed conflict between two or more distinct groups for more than one engagement. “Hostility” shall be defined as a statement of heightened tensions between two countries or groups of countries that may include, but is not limited to, heightened border security, proxy war, economic and political competition for dominance, and espionage.

## **DEDICATION**

To my family, for always being supportive of my “Beowulf thing.”

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Written approximately by the year 1000, *Beowulf* is one of the oldest war stories in the history of the English language, containing references to both international politics and individual combat. The somber mood of the poem would hardly seem to lend itself to stirring cries for war, yet Beowulf as a character or as a symbol has often been appropriated for militaristic reasons, such as a symbol of British perseverance during the London Bombings (such as in Bryher's *Beowulf*) or as a symbol of German myth in Nazi propaganda.

### **Objective**

This thesis will illustrate how *Beowulf* adaptations during times of war or hostility reflect values or attitudes related to the relevant hostilities, and specifically how those adaptations generally grow more introspective or “morally gray” as the nature of war has changed.

### **Methodology**

Research will be conducted mainly through Texas A&M University's extensive library catalog. OAK Trust will also be utilized, along with any other sources that offer related scholarly works or theses. Also included in primary resources will be film or literary adaptations from the relevant time periods, which will be selected based on their unique variations from the source text that reflect political or cultural attitudes toward war in the time they were written. Simple translations or retellings with no significant differences will be discarded. Due to the nature of this research, many conclusions regarding author or illustrator intent may be based solely on

literary interpretation, and may suffer bias as a result. However, the research itself will hopefully be thorough enough to avoid this potential problem.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ENGLAND OF OLD: BEOWULF IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The earliest widespread use of Beowulf during wartime was as a nationalist symbol by Great Britain in the Second World War. Nowhere is this exemplified better than in the novel *Beowulf* written by Mary Anne Ellerman under her pseudonym Bryher. Although written after the war's end in 1956, it can safely be assumed that Bryher sought to portray what the attitudes of the Londoners were at the time of the bombing rather than at the time of publishing. It vividly describes the life of the average Londoner during The Blitz and demonstrates the power of nationalism by providing the reader with a plaster bulldog named Beowulf who becomes a symbol of wealth, hope and resilience to the English. Herbert Read's collection, *The Knapsack*, is later discussed as a second source of inspiration for British troops.

#### **Symbols and Nationalism in Bryher's *Beowulf***

The plot concerns several British characters trying to survive German bombing runs during The Blitz. Two women, Angelina and Selina, own a small tea shop named The Warming Pan that evokes the comfort and luxury of Hrothgar's hall Heorot with its cozy name and "nicely browned crumpets and thick gingerbread, rock cakes and buns..." (30). The German bombers, reminiscent of Grendel as they stalk in the night unseen, have already begun to take their toll by forcing the government to ration food. This greatly upsets Selina: "She hated ration cards...because they were a symbol of some poverty of spirit...how detestable the propaganda of the Food Ministry was, with the emphasis upon oatmeal and raw carrots; were they not fighting for an England of plenty, for that older England of sirloins of beef and mountains of cheddar cheese?" (30). Just as the Old English valued wealth in the form of treasure, the modern English

of the novel valued wealth (both material and spiritual) in the form of food, with yellow mountains of glittering gold replaced by yellow mountains of aromatic cheese, along with the fine steak symbolizing musculature and strength.

Another character, an old, romantic man named Horatio, is similarly ashamed when he cannot afford the finest goods: “’Better a cup a day of the best, though, than four out of some nameless packet.’ He hoped Mr. Dobbie had not noticed how many months it had been since he had been able to afford his favorite blend” (36). For such an idealistic man like Horatio, the lack of wealth signposts a deep and personal shame. Earlier in the story, Horatio, an artist by trade, grumbles to himself that “what the world needed was not machinery but penitence, a return to apprenticeship, to straight lines and ‘taking pains’” (15). But now that England has abandoned what made it great in favor of “shrieking engines...tearing up moral values, lustily destroying homes” (16), Horatio can only cling to the tangible symbols of his old England in the golden luxury of butter: “Let them keep his meat if they wanted, but he had never tasted margarine, poor as he had been, and he was not going to begin now” (17). Later, after feeling insulted by the shopkeeper, Horatio seethes that “If he had still been able to afford the six and twopenny China, no tradesman would have dared dismiss him in such a manner” (40). Horatio clearly feels insecure and desires a return to personal wealth and status, which was representative of the country’s desires at the time.

Similar to Horatio is another character, Colonel Ferguson, a retired military man who has reenlisted but has found no place for himself in the “new” England. He represents England’s martial tradition and drive for fame: seemingly useless, but nonetheless providing a vital service to his country by leading Selina to safety after the bombing at the end. When introduced, however, he feels like a stranger in his own country upon seeing a French soldier in London:

“For a moment, Colonel Ferguson felt tempted to speak, to say, ‘I don’t feel at home here myself’, but his French was rusty and the fellow might not have understood him” (42). Both Ferguson and the soldier are representative of their own countries, as the colonel himself notices: “He had seen personified in a single soldier the story of an end of France” (43). The usage by Ellerman of Ferguson as a synecdoche of Britain is very similar to how Beowulf is used as a symbol of Geatish power in the original poem. Ferguson is inspired, however, by his observations of the heroic British courage: “Nobody had even thought of going to a shelter; and, looking up at the grey, dismal sky, Ferguson almost felt sorry for the Germans” (47). While Ferguson also notes that the courage of the citizens is “sublime stupidity” (46), he acknowledges its importance to morale, especially since Ferguson himself earlier observed that “morale was more important than machinery” (45). In a meaningful fashion, Ellerman begins her novel with the perspectives of the oldest characters, to foreshadow the revitalizing of old ideals and old heroes.

At this point in the novel, the citizens are ready to look back to their roots, the devices and ideologies of the future are regarded with suspicion, and the Londoners clearly long for a savior from the past to break the siege over their shop like Hrothgar and his hall. And one does: the scowling plaster bulldog that Selina’s partner, Angelina, hauls into the shop. Significantly, the dog was found “in a salvage sale, opposite the Food Office” (66) as though in protest. Even as England’s old values are being discarded like refuse in a salvage sale, they, personified by Beowulf the bulldog, continue to fight for the welfare of the people, protesting the shortages of edible wealth and power created by the Food Office. Although Beowulf’s name is described by the idealistic Horatio as “gallant” (66), Angelina responds that her purchase is a “symbol...of common sense” (66). Angelina, who loathes Horatio’s romanticism and displays socialist

leanings in describing Beowulf as a hero “that could be accepted by the proletariat”, nevertheless believes that England requires a hero to free them from destruction: one who is, in her own words, “an emblem of the whole of us, so gentle, so determined...” (66). The Londoners are revitalized by the dog that reminds them of their roots, history, and gives “the bleak, dingy room an air of gaiety” (67), similar to the encouragement felt by Hrothgar and his thanes upon Beowulf’s arrival in the poem.

The youngest Londoners, however, fail to recognize the importance of the bulldog, and mock its appearance. Joe, a young man in the Army, wonders: “What a dog! Wherever did they get it from?” (133). But even after continued mocking, the youths are compelled to admit that “it added somehow, in spite of its vulgarity, to the atmosphere of the place.” (133). For the rest of the book, the various characters spend more and more time in the Warming Pan, simultaneously frightened by but also fascinated with Beowulf-a reaction that also applies to their rediscovering of their Old English values.

Finally, the Londoners are attacked one last time by the German bombers, this time with a direct hit on the Warming Pan. The restaurant is completely destroyed, yet Beowulf-standing in a position of resolve in the fireplace, a symbol of warmth and of the Old English Hall- and the inhabitants are unharmed: “All that remained was a table, upright, with two plates on it and Beowulf standing quietly under the mantelpiece” (189). Angelina, ever an optimist, remarks that the dog’s survival is a “good omen” (193). Even after Selina is devastated by the loss of her shop, the sight of Beowulf causes her to become optimistic: “She suddenly started to laugh. The landlord could not send them a demand for the rent! He could never send them a demand for the rent...she laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks” (194). The people find a Union Jack to place in Beowulf’s collar (193) and the bulldog “appears to be popular” (193). Angelina even

makes plans to fit Beowulf with a portable oven and wheels on his paws so she can continue to sell baked goods (198).

This further and final linkage between Beowulf and food enhances the power of the ending. Beowulf, and the values he represents, has been restored to his rightful place as a hero of England, and is a hope for the future. He will provide wealth in the form of food like a lord giving treasure to his thanes. The people's confidence in their victory has swelled; Selina remarks that it would "shock [the Germans]" to confront "such a nasty dog" (194). Thus, the power of the Grendel-like German bombers is broken, as evidenced by storekeeper Mr. Dobbie's remark that "Jerry's going to be very sorry for himself one day, and I hope I'm here to see it" (200). To the Londoners, and the rest of England, Beowulf promises them revenge, victory, and a return to the peaceful idyll that they had previously known, with abundance of food and wealth.

This is a simple and straightforward use of Beowulf, but there are also references to socialism and class struggle within the book that add another dimension to Beowulf as a symbol. They will be discussed in the second chapter concerning the Cold War and communist ideology.

### **Heroism in Read's *The Knapsack***

The second example of Beowulf's use as a patriotic English figure was the inclusion of an excerpt of the original poem in a compilation called *The Knapsack*. Compiled originally in 1939 and republished every year from 1942 to 1946, it contained a selection of poems and stories meant to boost the morale of the British soldiers it was distributed to. Its editor and creator, Herbert Read, was a soldier himself in World War I, and therefore had ample perspective on the life and psychology of a soldier. The book's preface reveals much insight as to why Read chose the works he did, and helps to explain his inclusion of *Beowulf* in particular. In his words: "Modern warfare is arduous enough; but it does involve...many hours of inactivity in which the

mind would willingly be engaged and distracted by reading” (v). Read believed that the anthology issued during his own service, *The Spirit of Man*, however, was lacking. He felt that “the very highness of its purpose, its sustained tone of moral seriousness, a certain abstractness in its idealism, failed to completely satisfy the realistic standards of our daily life” (vi). Read burned with desire for something “more objective, something more aware of material things, of flesh and blood, of action and experience” (vi). Read wanted soldiers to be able to use his collection to create “a workable philosophy that each man has to construct for himself if he is to preserve a serene mind” (vi).

This passage clearly displays the tremendous importance that the *Beowulf* story and its traditionally militaristic values contained to Britain during the war. Not only does Read think the adoption of *Beowulf*'s values are beneficial, but in fact necessary to maintaining the mental and spiritual health of the soldiers. Read goes on to explain himself further: “In my choice I have been guided by certain convictions. One is that the love of glory, even in our materialistic age, is still the main source of virtue. The real good is not done by calculation...it is an act of courage or of grace. I have therefore given a certain prominence to great deeds and noble characters.” (vi). *Beowulf* would certainly agree with Read's views on glory and virtue. Read is clearly intending the warrior to be a relevant and positive role model for British soldiers, not only in their pursuits of glory, but in their search for humility, which Read describes as “the secret of all human happiness” (vii).

There is yet more meaning present in the excerpt itself-the section of the poem describing *Beowulf*'s battle with Grendel's mother. Notably, it is given a position of prominence as the fourth writing in the book, following two classical Greek legends, and the Old English poem *The Seafarer*. But more significantly, the excerpt describes *Beowulf*'s journey through water to fight

an enemy-one of a greater authority than the one who attacked him in his own territory. This adventure could certainly resonate with the British who, having scarcely caught their breath from repelling German invaders, would soon be sent over the English Channel to strike at the heart of their enemies' "lair." The excerpt is a complete story within itself, beginning with Beowulf declaring his intention to kill Grendel's mother, but not without displaying humility in his request for his hosts to "Do thou be kind to my kinsmen-thegns, my boon-companions, if me the battle take..." (Lines 8-9).

Upon arriving at the mere, Beowulf is set upon by "the mer-wolf" (34) who bears "the ringed Prince to her own place" (35). Even as he is dragged beneath the water, Beowulf wastes no time in bravely attacking the creature, until he finds "that his battle-gleamer would not bite" (51). He is pinned by Grendel's mother, who attacks Beowulf with a knife, but is unable to kill him both due to his breastplate: "Over his arm there lay a woven breast-net; that warded his life, withstood the entry of point and edge" (78-79) and God's intervention: "The Wisest Lord, the Justice of Heaven judged it aright easily; so up he stood" (83-86). Beowulf then notices a magical sword forged by giants, which he uses to strike his foe "so that hard it gripped her on the neck" (96). After his enemy falls, the mere is bathed in a light that is described as "the Candle of Heaven" (102). On the surface, Beowulf's friends and hosts notice the "water blood foul" (124) and assume that "the wolf of the brine had broken him up" (130). However, Beowulf returns to the surface with Grendel's head and his sword hilt, and his retainers thank God "that they might see him safe and sound" (160). Finally, Beowulf returns triumphantly to Heorot, where he is greeted as "that elder among thanes, a deed-keen man, and duly cherished, a hero, battle hardy." (177-179).

Read's motivation for including the passage is clear. Remain humble, brave, and valiant as Beowulf in the mere, Read urges his readers readying to invade their own mere, and no harm will befall you, on the contrary; God will bring you victory and glory. Read's selection and stated motivation provide even further evidence of Beowulf's significance to the English as a source of resolve and certainty of victory.

# CHAPTER III

## COLD WARRIOR: BEOWULF ON BOTH SIDES OF THE IRON CURTAIN

The Cold War was a time of ideological battle and mistrust. The following adaptations reflect the period with frustrations over the existing class structure, such as certain aforementioned sections of Bryher's *Beowulf*, or hatred of war and the humans who eagerly engage in it, as in Gardner's *Grendel*, or wishful pacifist fantasies, such as with Nye's retelling. A sharp rebuttal would be the hyper masculine comic books produced by Jerry Bingham and Mike Gorman, or the paranoid, sci-fi thriller adaptation of Larry Niven. There is even a Soviet adaptation contained within a children's book written in Czechoslovakia. Just as the Cold War was a conflict fought on a binary scale that divided the planet into the First and Second Worlds, so it seems that adaptations of the era fell into a similar binary of either glorification of war, or utter rejection of it. As the de facto mode of conflict became region- instead of state-based, more and more non-British writers became comfortable appropriating Beowulf to suit their own personal agendas rather than as a nationalist symbol, which was to be expected in an era of cultural and ideological conflict that transcended nationalism.

### **Socialism in Bryher's *Beowulf***

Bryher's book, while a fictional account concerning the very recent events of World War II, was, as aforementioned, actually written in 1956, well into the Cold War, which would explain the inclusion of several explicit references to Soviet Russia, socialism, and class struggle in the book. British attitudes towards these subjects can be sensed from how the characters in the

book feel about them, and in Bryher's novel, all references to said subjects are delivered via the openly socialist character Angelina. Significantly, it is Angelina who finds Beowulf in the first place, and declares him a figure that "could be accepted by the proletariat" (66), and later, "a symbol for us, colleague" (94). It is explicitly stated here that Angelina would have called Selina "comrade", but she feels that the word does not suit her partner. Angelina's beliefs are regarded with exasperation by Selina, especially since Angelina jeopardizes the success of their business by referring to their customers as "stupid bourgeoisie" (29). Angelina also later suppresses the urge to cry, "Down with homes...why do we waste life in houses?" (102) and unfavorably compares her own country's bomb shelters to the more sufficient ones found in Moscow after the novel's climactic bombing-to which none of the other characters "[take] any notice" (191).

From the other characters' treatment of Angelina can be divined British sentiments towards their Russian former allies: gratitude for providing necessary help, but irritation over their aggressively preached ideology, and unrealistic ideas. It is interesting to imagine how Angelina's character might have been rewritten if Ellerman had penned the novel either earlier or later during the Cold War, when Russia was still seen as an honorable ally by the British (displayed by Winston Churchill's congratulatory presenting of a sword to Stalin following the Russian victory at Stalingrad) or as a threat to world peace (seen in Churchill's famous "Iron Curtain" speech). But even in deep in the Cold War, Communist ideology, represented by Angelina, presents no threat to the British, now that they have reclaimed their national heritage and identity and, along with it, their courage and resolve.

## Communist Anxiety in Vladimir Hulpach's *Beowulf*

An adaptation that also contains references, however subtle, to Communism is a retelling of *Beowulf* in a collection of children's stories published in Czechoslovakia in 1970 by Vladimir Hulpach. Importantly, the story was published only two years after the Prague Spring. The collection, titled *Heroes of Folk Tale and Legend*, is notable for several reasons. (Note that this thesis shall discuss the English language version, as no original Czech manuscript was available). Significantly, the *Beowulf* retelling is the first story in the collection, in a manner similar to *The Knapsack*. A poem at the beginning of a collection provides context for the collection: "Now let the lute sing, sing of the Golden Age, and listen to the story teller...Hear his tales...of kings and knights, and the many wars they waged, of chivalrous men who rode under a banner, of selfless men who sought no gain"(7). Compared to most other adaptations which emphasize Beowulf's desire for glory and the treasures that he is awarded with, the Hulpach retelling's focus on "selfless men who sought no gain" seems at odds. But if the retelling was an attempt to appropriate Beowulf to reinforce failing Communist ideals, the purpose behind the word choice becomes clear.

Firstly, special emphasis is given in the text that treasure was useless in stopping Grendel's attacks: "In vain did the desperate king hope that his golden treasure might assuage the monster's greed-Grendel did not so much as touch any of the precious objects" (11). While the source poem and most other adaptations simply note that Grendel does not kneel before the gift stool like a human visitor would, and in doing so perverts the sacred gift-giving culture of the Old English, in Hulpach's work it is more explicit. This can be interpreted as a subtle Communist message about the lack of value in treasure, or rather, the importance of treasure over security. There are other descriptions of treasure in the poem, but they are brief and focus

on certain kinds of items: “King Hrothgar gave to Beowulf and his friends many rich gifts: a gold-embroidered banner, suits of armor, a fine sword, and eight of his best horses with exquisite saddles” (16). Although the source poem mentions fine jewels, they are omitted from the retelling. Furthermore, the items mentioned are all weapons of war: horses, armor, and weapons. There is also a lack of details describing the opulence of Heorot: “One day, the banqueting hall, inlaid with rare wood and decorated with antlers, was darkened by the shadow of horror and woe” (11). When Beowulf leaves Heorot for his homeland, it is stated simply that, “He took leave of King Hrothgar, who gratefully bestowed twelve more magnificent gifts on the hero” (19). The deficit of imagery cannot be explained by a simple lack of descriptive skill on Hulpach’s part; given that he describes scenes of violence with gusto: “And no sooner had the monster sunk his claws into the first, than the scent of blood spurred him on to further slaughter. Like some fiend out of hell, Grendel killed and rent one man after the other. As long as there was a vestige of life left in the hall, he continued to glut himself with blood and the death cries of his victims” (11). The focus that Hulpach places on violence can be easily explained by the political dissent and beginnings of upheaval that occurred in Czechoslovakia in the 1970’s. While wealth and luxury may have seemed like a distant dream too painful to dwell on, the threat of violence must have been lurking in the back of his mind.

Secondly, there are references to a nonspecific God as in the poem and most other adaptations, but they are minimal and Hrothgar’s “Sermon” is omitted entirely. Hrothgar is stated to have been able to build Heorot “with God’s help” (10) but all other references to God are within dialogue, such as when the coast guard bids Beowulf “God be with you!” (13), or when Beowulf states that “It was God’s will that we should triumph” (16). Given the suppression

of religion under the Soviet system, it is understandable that Hulpach does not risk too many religious references.

Finally, the art from the book, illustrated by Miroslav Troup, can provide greater evidence in support of a Communist/Soviet attempt at appropriation. The first of two pictures in the story is of Grendel, a figure that is surprisingly human, due to his recognizable face and arms. The art is largely abstract, relying on blocks of color and free-flowing lines to create objects. Grendel is colored a deep purple, and is holding a severed arm that shares the same violet hue. While serving as an interesting, if entirely unintended, artistic and chromatic foreshadowing of Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution in the 1980's, the shared color between Grendel and the arm signifies an irreversible process-what has been taken will be consumed-in this instance, literally- and cannot be returned. The second picture features Grendel's mother recoiling from two warriors, who heavily feature the colors yellow and red in their palette. The connection to Soviet communism is obvious. The soldier closest to Grendel's mother, however, also sports several large splashes of green on his armor and person, in the same hue as Grendel's mother. The close proximity, combined with his raised shield, suggests that he is warding off an infection or similar threat from the monster. Both the images taken together convey a sense of anxiety, fear of loss, and fear of impurity. These sentiments were no doubt palpable in the general Czech population in the tumultuous period of the 1970's, when the Soviet Union's grip first began to loosen, both in Czechoslovakia itself and in the broader world stage.

Hulpach's paranoia and insecurity are clearly visible, as are his fears of invasion and subversion by a foreign power. These feelings are, ironically, identical to what his American counterparts expressed in their works, such as Larry Niven's *The Legacy of Heorot*.

**Misanthropy, Nihilism, and Anti-Vietnam Sentiment in Gardner's *Grendel***

In sharp contrast with the hyper masculine and morally simplistic comic books that shall be discussed later in this chapter, John Gardner's *Grendel* is saturated with angst, nihilism, and existential despair. Gardner's novel was and is regarded as one of the most significant *Beowulf* adaptations due to its focus on Grendel as an antihero protagonist, and commentary on myth and the human condition. This was partly due to Gardner's emotional troubles after accidentally causing the death of his brother, as described in Gardner's own novel, *Conversations with John Gardner*, which he coauthored with Allan Chavkin in 1990: "After the accidental death of his younger brother Gilbert, he became guilt-ridden and gloomy and 'drifted' into fiction writing" (ix). The nihilism of the book was also a reflection of the tumultuous times in which the novel was written. Although the Reagan Revolution and traditionalism led to economic growth, political unity, and cultural expression for the United States, allowing for statements of power and strength such as the Gorman and Bingham comics, *Grendel* was written in a time of heavy war weariness, political turmoil, and social unrest. Particularly, the public had long since lost interest in fighting the Vietnam War; a Gallup poll found that by January of 1970, 57% of Americans thought that sending troops into Vietnam was a mistake (Gillespie). This war weariness is almost immediately apparent in *Grendel*, as Grendel describes his feelings of conflict against nature and existence: "And so begins the twelfth year of my idiotic war. The pain of it! The stupidity!" (15). Although the Vietnam War was in its sixteenth year by 1971, it is reasonable to assume that Gardner did not intend to make direct reference to the war but rather desired to communicate his feelings about it, which were shared by the public. This direct condemnation of war is just one of many, and is the first of three techniques that Gardner uses to criticize war and humanity in *Grendel*, with the second being extreme misanthropy and the third being a critique of government and institutional power.

Firstly, continuing his denouncements of war, Grendel continues to rant, directing his anger towards himself: “Pointless, ridiculous monster crouched in the shadows, stinking of dead men, murdered children, and martyred cows” (6). His self-loathing criticisms can be interpreted as how many Americans viewed the military: brutal and “pointless”, crouched in the shadows of the jungles of Vietnam. After returning home to his mother, Grendel’s questions are reminiscent of the complaints voiced by American citizens and soldiers during the Vietnam War: “Why are we here?” I used to ask her. “Why do we stand this putrid, stinking hole?” (11) Similarly, his assumption of what his mother’s response might be invokes the frustration felt by the public when facing a hawkish government that was unable to justify the war: “Don’t ask!” (11). After a long series of attacks against Heorot, Grendel notes incredulously that the men are incapable of forming new strategies to defeat him, and revert to mindless routine: “Meanwhile, up in the shattered hall, the builders are hammering, replacing the door for (it must be) the fiftieth or sixtieth time, industrious and witless as worker ants— except that they make small, foolish changes, adding a few more iron pegs, more iron bands, with tireless dogmatism” (14). This dogmatism and strategic bankruptcy were often felt by the public towards the end of the war. A later observation from Grendel reinforces the image of humans as unable to recognize defeat and an insurmountable foe: “The song swells, pushes through woods and sky, and they’re singing now as if by some lunatic theory they had won” (14). Further criticisms of human, and specifically, American actions during war, include their propensity towards lying: “When two hunters from different bands came together in the woods, they would fight until the snow was slushy with blood, then crawl back, gasping and crying, to their separate camps to tell wild tales of what happened” (31), their savagery: “no wolf was so vicious to other wolves” (32) and the ease with which they kill their fellow man: “Now and then some trivial argument would break

out, and one of them would kill another one, and all the others would detach themselves from the killer as neatly as blood clotting” (32). Gardner portrays the humans as existing in a state of almost perpetual conflict, which is understandable given the years of frustrating stalemate and proxy war that had occurred in the decades leading up to *Grendel*: “Then the wars began, and the war songs, and the weapon making. If the songs were true, as I suppose at least one or two of them were, there had always been wars, and what I’d seen was merely a period of mutual exhaustion” (34). Gardner even goes so far as to imply that war is an inseparable part of the human condition and is responsible for every major human endeavor, speaking through the dragon that Grendel stumbles upon: ““You [Grendel] improve them, my boy! Can’t you see that yourself? You stimulate them! You make them think and scheme. You drive them to poetry, science, religion, all that makes them what they are for as long as they last. You are, so to speak, the brute existent by which they learn to define themselves. The exile, captivity, and death they shrink from—the blunt facts of their mortality, their abandonment—that’s what you make them recognize, embrace! You are mankind, or man’s condition: inseparable as the mountain-climber and the mountain. If you withdraw, you’ll instantly be replaced” (72). Gardner implies that humans require enemies to keep them organized and motivated, yet all humans do with that increased efficiency is find better ways to wage war, which can only end in oblivion: “Ashes to ashes and slime to slime, amen” (72).

Gardner also uses this pessimism combined with misanthropy to reflect and inspire public opinion on war and itself. Grendel’s accounts of human embellishing their accomplishments can be read as sympathy towards a people who felt that they could not trust their government to be honest, as well as an acknowledgement of (and guilt felt from) the horrendous acts of violence being committed in its name. Grendel notes that his mother suffers from guilt in a manner similar

to humans: “Guilty, she imagines, of some unremembered, perhaps ancestral crime. (She must have some human in her)” (11). This guilt reduces his mother to a state similar to the American public at the height of the war: “baffled” and “long-suffering” (11). This pessimism reaches its ultimate expression in nihilistic statements that share great similarity to the cultural pessimism caused by the postmodern ideas of the 1960’s and 70’s. Gardner implies that American nihilism of the era can be credited to the Vietnam War, by having Grendel realize that “The world was nothing: a mechanical chaos of casual, brute enmity on which we stupidly impose our hopes and fears” (21) at the height of his agony as he lies in a dark cave with an injured ankle. This hopelessness is directed at humanity with Grendel’s cry of ““You’re all crazy,’ I bellowed, ‘you’re all insane!’” (27), directed at his human tormenters.

Finally, Gardner narrows his critique of human institutions by devoting a portion of Chapter 8 to critiquing the very idea of government power, military might, and international hegemonies, which is personified by Hrothgar and later, Beowulf. Hrothgar’s quest for power is similar to the rise and organization of the Soviet Union and the United States as superpowers and their construction of networks of allies in the Warsaw Pact and NATO, respectively: “Hrothgar, who’d begun hardly stronger than the others, began to outstrip the rest. He’d worked out a theory about what fighting was for, and now he no longer fought with his six closest neighbors. He’d shown them the strength of his organization, and now, instead of making war on them, he sent men to them every three months or so, with heavy wagons and back-slings, to gather their tribute to his greatness. They piled his wagons high with gold and leather and weapons, and they kneeled to his messengers and made long speeches and promised to defend him against any foolhardy outlaw that dared to attack him.” (37). Gardner, through Grendel, makes it clear that he is mocking the idea of the tribute system by painting the participants as willfully deluded:

“Hrothgar’s messengers answered with friendly words and praise of the man they’d just plundered, as if the whole thing had been his idea” (37). Gardner also continues this passage with a long description of the various disasters that treasure convoys could face on the road, further undermining their effectiveness. At this point in the novel, Hrothgar’s kingdom begins to resemble a world hegemony, such as through Grendel’s statement that “His [Hrothgar’s] power overran the world” (40) and the shaper’s predictions of Hrothgar’s peoples’ might: “They would seize the oceans, the farthest stars, the deepest secret rivers in Hrothgar’s name! Men wept like children: children sat stunned. It went on and on, a fire more dread than any visible fire” (43). Gardner also notes that the people are very easily manipulated by the shaper into believing lies about their own moral righteousness: “The man had changed the world, had torn up the past by its thick, gnarled roots and had transmuted it, and they, who knew the truth, remembered it his way— and so did I” (43). As well, the shaper imbues the people with a sense of superiority that can be interpreted as a form of exceptionalism similar to the kind felt in America during and after the Cold War: “The Shaper talked of how God had vanquished their enemies and filled up their houses with precious treasure, how they were the richest, most powerful people on earth, how here and here alone in all the world men were free and heroes were brave and virgins were virgins” (77). This can be read as an extension of Gardner’s criticisms to include an attack on government propaganda employed by the great powers of the time. Gardner also expresses skepticism over the longevity of Hrothgar’s might, when Grendel remarks “Yet I also remembered, as if it had happened, great Scyld, of whose kingdom no trace remained, and his farsighted son, of whose greater kingdom no trace remained” (44). All great empires fall, warns Gardner. This nihilistic view is echoed by the dragon, who tells Grendel to “Pick an apocalypse, any apocalypse. A sea of black oil and dead things. No wind. No light. Nothing stirring, not even

an ant, a spider. A silent universe. Such is the end of the flicker of time, the brief, hot fuse of events and ideas set off, accidentally, and snuffed out, accidentally, by man” (71).

True to the dragon’s word, Hrothgar’s plans indeed bring him to ruin. As Grendel spies on Hrothgar in his old age, he notes that “He had in his youth the strength of seven men. Not now. He has nothing left but the power of his mind— and no pleasure there: a case of knives. The civilization he meant to build has transmogrified to a forest thick with traps” (121). Besides reading as a critique of hegemonic power, it could also be viewed as a more specific attack on American attempts at nation building in Vietnam, which resulted in rather literal forests full of traps. Hrothgar’s great wealth proves to be an untreatable weakness, as it makes him a tempting target for younger, upcoming kings: “And then too there’s his treasure-hoard. Another trap. A man plunders to build up wealth to pay his men and bring peace to the kingdom, but the hoard he builds for his safety becomes the lure of every marauder that happens to hear of it. Hrothgar, keen of mind, is out of schemes. No fault of his. There are no schemes left” (122). Even the greatest amounts of national treasure, warns Gardner, won’t protect the nation in times of crisis. In fact, there is no solution for Hrothgar. Grendel notes that the king and his wife have now begun to realize that “peace must be searched through ordeal upon ordeal, with no final prospect but failure” (122). There is no way for Hrothgar to attain the impossible fantasy promised by the shaper, just as there is no way for America to attain the possibility of world peace through military intervention and imperialism.

The critique of hegemonic powers and their methods gives way to a broader attack on the institution of government and its use of violence in Chapter Eight. Hrothgar’s nephew, Hrothulf, and his peasant counselor Red Horse are discussing the possibilities and moral implication of revolting against Hrothgar. Red Horse, whose name may be a reference to the color of

communist ideology, espouses totalitarian philosophy regarding revolutions to Hrothulf, arguing that “The incitement to violence depends upon total trans valuation of the ordinary values. By a single stroke, the most criminal acts must be converted to heroic and meritorious deeds. If the Revolution comes to grief, it will be because you and those you lead have become alarmed at your own brutality” (117). Similar to a Communist revolutionary, Red Horse rejects religious ideals, preferring instead to revere the idea of revolution: “The total ruin of institutions and morals is an act of creation. A religious act. Murder and mayhem are the life and soul of revolution” (118). Red Horse attacks the concept of the state as solely a means to power through the use of violence: “Exactly, my boy! What is the state in a time of domestic or foreign crisis? What is the state when the chips are down? The answer is obvious and clear...The state is an organization of violence, a monopoly in what it is pleased to call legitimate violence. Revolution, my dear prince, is not the substitution of immoral for moral, or of illegitimate for legitimate violence; it is simply the pitting of power against power, where the issue is freedom for the winners and enslavement of the rest” (119). Gardner seems to be tapping into the vast well of anti-government sentiment prominent in the 1960’s which was only intensified following violent clashes such as the Kent State shootings. Following years of war which many citizens viewed as unjustified, trust in the government had begun to erode. This is made clear by Red Horse’s final line: “All systems are evil. All governments are evil. Not just a trifle evil. Monstrously evil” (120).

The final technique used by Gardner to demonize war is to literally demonize the character of Beowulf by having him transform into a winged, fiery creature. But first, Grendel’s initial impression of Beowulf invokes incredible potential power: “He had a strange face that, little by little, grew unsettling to me: it was a face, or so it seemed for an instant, from a dream I

had almost forgotten. The eyes slanted downward, never blinking, unfeeling as a snake's. He had no more beard than a fish. He smiled as he spoke, but it was as if the gentle voice, the childlike yet faintly ironic smile were holding something back, some magician-power that could blast stone cliffs to ashes as lightning blasts trees" (154). In particular, the references to blasting cliffs to ashes evokes images of the atomic bomb. Beowulf represents the ultimate degree of the ultimate form of government violence: nuclear war. Beowulf is further characterized as "a disguise for something infinitely more terrible" (155) and "insane" (161). If Beowulf represents the strongest power in Grendel's world, then it is reasonable to assume that in the spirit of Gardner's critique, he represents American military power in the real world. In attacking Grendel with both overwhelming physical and psychological force, he cements his dominance over the earth. In his own words: "It is coming, my brother. Believe it or not. Though you murder the world, turn plains to stone, transmogrify life into I and it, strong searching roots will crack your cave and rain will cleanse it: The world will burn green, sperm build again. My promise. Time is the mind, the hand that makes (fingers on harp strings, hero-swords, the acts, the eyes of queens). By that I kill you." (170). When using the same kind of language as the shaper, Beowulf reinforces the power of men and their ability to build lasting empires. Grendel, representing opposition to war, will be destroyed mercilessly, and Beowulf, representing the great powers of the world and America in particular, will continue to fight to shape the world to their will, regardless of consequences. This demonic Beowulf can also be interpreted as a return of the dragon from the beginning of the book, who is destroying Grendel not out of spite but because it is inevitable, like the dragon's analogy of burning the mead hall in his first meeting with Grendel. The novel ends on a message of despair, as Grendel, a misanthropic being but a being

of reason and a check on the great powers nonetheless, dies. Gardner seems to feel hopeless that American warmongering will ever end, or create lasting peace.

### **The Wish for Peace in Robert Nye's *Beowulf: A New Telling***

Another adaptation which can be contrasted with Gardner's *Grendel* is Robert Nye's *A New Telling*. The novel reimagines several key events of the poem and deletes some of them entirely, replacing them with events that are more consistent with the book's light and optimistic tone. Like with Read's *Knapsack*, Nye provides the reader with a short introduction that makes his motivations clear. He begins by saying that he "has not tried to compete" with literal versions of *Beowulf* (6) and that his work "is an interpretation, not a translation" (6). In his own words: "One retells old myths and legends hoping to be rewarded with the discovery that their meaning is still very much alive and creative" (6). Nye is very intent on uncovering the "core" message or meme of *Beowulf*, and passing it onto his readers. Nye's interpretation of this central meme can provide explanations as to why *Beowulf* adaptations are so prevalent. Nye's work contains themes of nonviolence, humanism, and positive portrayals of religion, which all heavily contrast with Gardner's novel and contribute to a much more optimistic ending.

Firstly, the chief two heroes of the story, Scyld Scefing and Beowulf, both rely on nonviolence to solve problems. Rather than building an empire at the tip of the sword as he did in the poem, Scyld "was kind and wise, and his people loved him. Under his rule, peace came to the land of the Danes, because none of the neighbor countries dared fight with such a giant. Instead, they brought him gifts and tributes so that he would not go to war against them" (8). Beowulf is also characterized in a similar manner. He is described as "strong because he was good, and good because he had the strength to accept in him things that were bad" (24). These traits are displayed when Beowulf meets Unferth. Unferth insults Beowulf after the Geats pick

apples from a field that Unferth claims was cursed. Beowulf eats an apple with no ill effect, and a humiliated Unferth draws a dagger. Beowulf thinks quickly and hands Unferth an apple, saying “I don’t peel them myself. Things seem to lose something with their skin off, don’t you think? But every man to his own taste” (30). Even after being threatened, Beowulf manages to impress Hrothgar and Wealtheow, avoid damaging Unferth’s ego further, and retain his civility. The event is a drastic departure from the boasts and mockeries hurled by Unferth and Beowulf in the poem and most other adaptations. In fact, Beowulf even attempts to act as a moral teacher for Unferth: “Listen Unferth, and I will tell you something. You think that bad brings forth bad only, and that the good man should hold apart from it. I suggest that things aren’t so simple, so black and white. Even the wickedest person can do good for someone” (31). Even in his fight with Grendel, Beowulf makes no attempt to harm the monster beyond holding him in place and waiting for him to give up or die: “I do not fear you, Grendel. I do not fear, therefore I do not fight. I only hold you, child of Cain. I only fix you fast in your own evil, so that you cannot turn it out on any other” (41). Beowulf also dispatches Grendel’s mother in a mostly nonviolent fashion, by using an incantation to make her fall asleep before killing her: “He said: ‘I am Beowulf, son of Beowulf.’ The monster’s eyes went cloudy. He said: ‘I am Beowulf, father of himself.’ The eyes were helpless. They flickered with sleep. He said: ‘I am Beowulf, who am myself.’ The eyes shut. ‘Sleep,’ said Beowulf softly. ‘Sleep deep and never wake again.’ She slept. Gently, carefully, with a stroking softness that was nearly pity, Beowulf put his hands around Her neck, and strangled Her”(65). Finally, Beowulf kills the dragon using a rather whimsical tactic; by tricking the dragon into swallowing a queen bee, whose fellow bees then sting the dragon to death from the inside: “The bees poured down the monster’s throat like a stream of honey, in pursuit of their queen. But when they reached the fire-drake’s stomach their

effect was like no honey in the world. They began to sting! Hundreds of bees, stinging it from the inside!” (92). Beowulf even feels sadness over the loss of his pet bees: “‘A pity about the bees,’ he said at last. ‘I loved them’”(93). This kind of extreme pacifism and restraint could only have been born out of war weariness caused by the Vietnam War. Published in 1968, Nye’s *Retelling* is very similar to Gardner’s *Grendel* in the sense that it condemns war, albeit in a much less misanthropic way. Nye’s Beowulf always tries to find the best in others, similarly to how Gardner’s dragon tells Grendel that his evil inspires the humans to better themselves.

Beowulf does not only seek nonviolence, but provides compassion even for his enemies and traitors. Nye reinterprets Unferth as a traitor who tries to collaborate with Grendel, due to extreme isolation and possibly depression: “He was terribly alone. He did not belong here...he belonged out there in the night, the fatal darkness, the imperishable black...the tree of evil looked taller and more familiar to Unferth than the slender green tree of good. Its twisted roots went down into his own being” (53). After Beowulf kills Grendel, Unferth suffers a nervous breakdown and snarls to Beowulf: “You killed him! He was beautiful, and you killed him!” (44). The gathered crowd wants to hang Unferth for his treachery, but Beowulf defends the man, saying “To Unferth, Grendel *was* beautiful” (44). This merciful trait is also displayed after Unferth lets Grendel’s mother into Heorot and murders Aeschere, when Beowulf remarks that “There is no why where Unferth is concerned...he’s at the mercy of his own evil, and hardly knows what he does” (55). Beowulf’s mercy is seen a third time when Unferth’s severed head is found at the entrance to Grendel’s mother’s cave: “‘Bury Unferth’s head,’ he said. ‘He was a person to be pitied’” (60). Beowulf’s humanism is displayed one final time during the Geats’ war with the Friesians, which begins shortly after Beowulf’s return home. Hygleac is killed, and Beowulf is requested to take the throne by Hygleac’s wife Hygd. Beowulf refuses and suggests

that the royal couple's infant son Hardred should be king. To test Hardred's character, Beowulf hands the boy several toy blocks, to which the boy responds "mercy", "pity", and "peace" (77). Beowulf proclaims "Long live Hardred! Long live any monarch who learns to speak of mercy, pity, and peace while still in his mother's arms!" (78). Indeed, Hardred is stated by Nye to have grown up to be "kind and firm and generous, brave in battle, gentle in the company of women, straight in his every dealing" (78). Nye's motivations are clearly viewed in Beowulf's speech to Grendel's mother, in which he states that "I hold a Cain in me, but do not let him out...that man is truly good who knows his own dark places" (64). Nye wishes for the reader to adopt Beowulf's philosophy, and it is hard not to sympathize with him when the period of war, protest, torture, and nihilism present during the novel's writing and publishing are considered.

Beyond fighting against the evils of warfare during his time with inspirational messages, Nye also makes liberal use of religious allusions and imagery, in an attempt to combat sentiments of atheism and nihilism displayed in Gardner's *Grendel*. Firstly are Beowulf's many aforementioned references to Cain, as well as Nye's insistence that many pools in Grendel's mere "were bottomless, and went straight down to hell" (13). Unferth tells a modified version of the fable of Cain and Abel in which Grendel is explicitly designated as a son of Cain, and upon arriving in Daneland, Beowulf leaves his sword in a mound on the beach, which the coast guard notes "shone in the sunlight like a cross" (27). These elements help to reinforce Beowulf as a selfless Christ figure.

Nye also makes several choices in dialogue that convey nationalist sentiments, which further identifies the book as a product of its time. When Beowulf meets the coast guard, he appeals to the guard's patriotism by stating "If you love your country-as I'm sure you do-then you'll help us, not hinder us" (25). Beowulf's desire to return to his own land is framed in terms

of patriotic homesickness, rather than in terms of his duty to Hyglaec: “Then the king saw by the tears in Beowulf’s eyes at the mere mention of ‘home’ that he did indeed pine for his own country” (71).

Finally, Nye attempts to legitimize his humanistic and pacifistic philosophy by changing the ending of the story to be much more optimistic than the poem’s ending. Beowulf’s cairn is so inspiring that “no one saw it without feeling an inch taller where he stood” (94). Wiglaf assumes the throne, and rules “wisely and well until the end of his days” (94). Nye’s adaptation is much more lighthearted and inspiring than the original poem, which speaks to Nye’s desire for his country and the world to avoid the Geats’ fate of endless war and destruction, and his hope that *Beowulf*’s meaning was truly “still very much alive and creative.”

### **Masculinity and Militarism in Bingham’s Comic**

A departure from both Gardner and Nye, Jerry Bingham’s 1984 comic *Beowulf* is much more simplistic and obvious in its cultural influences, but still significant for its capture of an American cultural shift towards masculinity and larger than life figures. The same cultural forces that swept Ronald Reagan into power in the Reagan Revolution gave birth to a hyper masculine and violent adaptation that more closely resembles *Conan the Barbarian* than *Beowulf*. The comic, presumably aimed at an adolescent male audience, is saturated with themes of heroism, strength, violence, and sexism.

Far from the introspection of Gardner’s philosophical and witty Grendel, or Nye’s wise and thoughtful Beowulf, Bingham’s Beowulf is a simple warrior, described as being “born of a legendary time, coming from a land where legends are born...to make a mark in the pages of history that would long endure after the seas had turned to rivers and the mountains to sand” (5).

Beowulf is portrayed as a tall, incredibly muscular man wearing only a loincloth, a fashion choice that endures even through his old age and kingship. Beowulf is also stripped of almost all dialogue; in the entire first half of the comic representing the poem from beginning to Beowulf's kingship, Beowulf speaks briefly only five times: of his quest to the coast guard (15), offering his services to Hrothgar (16), making a battle boast before facing Grendel (18), and promising Hrothgar that he will avenge Aeschere's death (27). In the second half of the comic, detailing Beowulf's battle with the dragon and death, he has no spoken dialogue whatsoever. His words and actions are portrayed solely through the 3<sup>rd</sup> person: "Beowulf knew full well that his life was ended. He bade young Wiglaf make haste that he might behold the gleaming treasure, and more peacefully leave the life and realm he had ruled so long" (48). The shortage of dialogue, along with dramatic narrations of the events of the poem, dehumanize Beowulf and portray him more as an icon or godlike figure than as a normal human being. Lacking any kind of commentary or self-awareness of this kind of portrayal on the part of the authors, other characters, or Beowulf himself, it can only be assumed that Bingham intended for Beowulf to be an aspirational figure for the young men of the late 80's, a time of conservative cultural reaction against the radical social and gender changes of the 60's and 70's.

This attitude is apparent in the way that men and warriors are presented in the comic. Almost all other men, not just Beowulf, wear a loincloth in addition to a stereotypical horned helmet, meant to evoke traditional depictions of Viking strength and aggressiveness. The absence of Hrothgar's sermon removes any chance for Bingham's Beowulf to display humility or introspection. Beowulf is referred to as a "hero", "warrior", "bold" or any other of a wide variety of positive descriptions almost every page. This only reinforces his superhuman status amongst his fellow warriors, and particularly amongst women.

The comic's portrayal of women is notable for its reflection of sexism, particularly a desire to return to traditional gender roles, prevalent in the 80's. Not a single female character speaks in Bingham's comic. While Zemeckis' film was criticized by many for containing sexist elements, negative attitudes towards women are far more prominent in Bingham's comic, where women do not even appear except in a few crowd scenes and draped over Beowulf while scantily clad, in an image that accompanies a description of his rise to king. This equation of power with submission by women is a patriarchal image that most likely represented the desires and even intentions of cultural traditionalists at the time. Incredibly, Queen Wealtheow is omitted entirely, not even appearing as a mute character. No mention of her is made, and no indication is given that Hrothgar is married. It is probable that Bingham understood his audience and strove to deliver a power fantasy that was removed of all female influence whatsoever, reducing women to little more than rewards for heroism. Due to the political power of feminism, however, hyper masculine male-oriented stories would soon leave the mainstream and the field of *Beowulf* adaptations, in favor of more subtle and complex works.

### **Militarism, Paranoia and Hope in Larry Niven's *The Legacy of Heorot***

One of these works was another adaptation from the later part of the Cold War; *The Legacy of Heorot*, written in 1987 by Larry Niven, along with Jerry Pournelle and Steven Barnes. Similarly to Bingham's work, it reflects the culture of paranoia and insecurity that gripped the country during the Cold War, although by contrast the novel's attitudes towards war, hierarchy and gender roles, and humanity are much more complex and progressive.

The novel concerns a group of space explorers who colonize a new planet named Avalon. After they mistakenly assume that the planet contained no threatening life forms, an alien species which the colonists refer to as "Grendels" begins to attack their settlement. The science fiction

setting and introduction of alien adversaries reflect both the technological contests in the Cold War such as the space race or the efforts to build missile defense systems such as Reagan's Star Wars project, as well as the American desire to expand and exert their power in farther and farther frontiers. The book's first text is an excerpt from the poem, in which Beowulf, near death, states, "Thou must look now to the needs of the nation" (14). Although the book's cast is multinational, the choice of phrases from the poem reveal a nationalist motive on the part of the authors. The protagonist, Cadmann Weyland, not only references Norse and Old English culture through his name, but also through his occupation: Cadmann is a veteran of multiple conflicts spanning the globe, and serves as the colony's head of security. Cadmann serves as an avatar for Anglo-Saxon or Western power, similar to Colonel Ferguson in Bryher's *Beowulf*. Specifically, Cadmann represents the decline of said power, since he has reached middle age by the time of his arrival on Avalon, and finds his body to be less strong than it used to be: "He could remember when he hadn't needed regular exercise to maintain the natural tone... 'I'm slowing down,' he thought" (18). Besides Cadmann's anxiety over aging, he also feels shame over his perceptions of being useless, as the colonists have come to believe that Avalon is safe and that his skills and security procedures were never necessary: "Perimeters. Three rings. Electric fence, mine field, barbed wire. It made sense at the time. Cadmann's folly. And one of these days they'll make me go dig up the mines. No enemies. No dangers. Nothing. And all that fucking work to build fences" (24). Although *Legacy* never glorifies war to the same extent as Bingham's comic book, Cadmann's desire for conflict to give him purpose is made clear, and acts as a symbol for a nation that had done little else but prepare for war for several decades. As Cadmann views disk recordings of his past military assignments, he laments "We were needed. Then" (26). Now that America, like Cadmann, felt at risk of becoming obsolete, they turned to paranoia and

anti-communist sentiment, which were prevalent in the 1980's. These fears, for Cadmann, are only intensified after being vocalized by Terry, another colonist with an antagonistic relationship to Cadmann: "You're not a farmer. You're not a builder. You're not even an engineer. You're just an assistant navigator, and an extremely expendable security arm" (38). After the Grendel kills some of their livestock, the colonists begin to suspect Cadmann of manufacturing the disasters so that he can feel needed: "[Terry] turned back to Cadmann. 'Before you get your back up, no, I'm not accusing you or your friends...but it wouldn't shock me if you wish I had. There are some people who need a fight to feel alive...who feel old and useless without one'" (72). Similarly to Terry, leftist political groups in the 60's and 70's either refused to see the Soviet Union as a threat or even promoted Communist ideology themselves, spurring a reactionary right wing backlash after the Iranian Revolution and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan stoked a new wave of fear and mistrust towards the Soviet Union. However, unlike the Americans whose renewed anticommunist feelings led to thorough searches for infiltrators that produced no real enemies, Cadmann benefits from the luxury of having his suspicions and paranoia proven correct, after a Grendel kills a colonist and steals her baby from its crib: "With a twist of its thick, powerful body it was back to the nest of straight twigs, and the small invader even now was squealing its fear. The creature reached in and picked it up. It was so small, so helpless" (85). The fearful language captures the terror Cold War-era Americans fell towards the idea of similar infiltration destroying their families and ways of life.

Ironically, both Americans and the colonists would abandon, at least temporarily, some of their sacred values in order to survive. Just as the 80's saw a resurgence in the popularity of conservative political thought that dampened the egalitarian progress made by feminist and other minority groups, so do the enlightened and utopian colonists temporarily revert to patriarchy and

other forms of hierarchy to better organize Avalon's fight against the grendels. After democratically elected leader Zack Moscovitz- a name significant due to its Russian implications- fails to assuage the grief of the colonists who have lost loved ones to the grendels, the citizens begin to question his authority and demand the more authoritarian leadership of Cadmann: "There was a moment of silence, then Greg spoke in a voice that was pure venom. 'Why didn't we listen? Why couldn't we have listened? Did Cadmann ask for so much?'" (125) Sylvia, a scientist who harbors romantic feelings for Cadmann, acknowledges that "If a camp vote had been taken after the disaster, Zack would have been outed and Cadmann elected to the post in a moment" (133). The dissent culminates in Zack's cession of the rule of Avalon to Cadmann after several more devastating grendel attacks: "'Now then,' Zack said firmly, 'it's time to make some decisions. If we're going to have any chance of surviving, we need total cooperation. We can do this, but only if we operate at peak efficiency. No holding back, no dissension. There's no time for that. First of all: Colonel Weyland will take charge of defense, and we're on a war footing'" (283). This regression towards tribal leadership and militarism extends to the relations between Cadmann and his lover Mary Ann as well; after accepting Mary Ann into his camp, Cadmann informs her that his word is law: "'You do things my way,'" he said. 'If you don't like it, go home. Down there, things can be whatever way people decide by vote that they should be. This is not a democracy. Up here I'm the bottom line'" (146). Mary Ann finds herself accepting, and even enjoying, her and Cadmann's reversion to traditional gender roles: "There was something about the darkness and the warmth. About being next to a man who had built his dwelling by the strength of his back and wits. Something about Cadmann rediscovering himself, and her, that made her feel warm and small and protected. Protected...a competent, civilized human being didn't need a protector. Mary Ann Eisenhower, Ph. D. in

Agricultural Sciences, had been quite capable of taking care of herself, thank you...now she was the dependent of a brawny, self-sufficient warrior” (153).

But the novel’s seeming endorsement of patriarchy and traditionalism is done with a more complex motivation than as a reactionary fantasy. Cadmann’s musings on the historical origins of gender roles suggest that they are both immoral and temporary: “It’s always been about the children. Always. Women have never loved being second class citizens. Men have never enjoyed having their balls shot off in wars. Men and women didn’t fall into their roles accidentally, and each side doesn’t hate the other. It happened because for a thousand generations, that was the best way we knew to build a civilization, to build a better time for our children” (229). Cadmann’s hypotheses seem to carry truth, for by the end of the novel Mary Ann is one of several women who suggest that a husbandless colonist engage in a decidedly nontraditional practice such as seducing a married colonist, participating in an orgy, or using artificial insemination in order to become pregnant. The colonists adopt a more communal lifestyle to compensate for their population losses against the grendels, and Avalon heals: “Inside the compound were naked scars, remains of the grendel attacks, but most of those were being built upon or plowed over. In a year there would be no trace” (364). Similarly, even as the US reverted to a more traditional state, optimism and hope for a brighter future continued, as President Reagan helped Soviet leader Gorbachev initiate slow reforms and liberalization. The optimism would only swell with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and a subsequent reinforcement of American belief that the values of free markets and free government were unassailable. The euphoria would be short lived.

## CHAPTER IV

### “THE AGE OF HEROES IS DEAD” - BEOWULF IN PRE- AND POST-9/11 WARTIME ADAPTATIONS

Following the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was left standing as the world’s sole superpower. While Americans enjoyed the accompanying safety and feelings of superiority, globalization promised to liberalize, connect, and unite all countries. This optimism can be best viewed in John McTiernan’s *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior*, with heroic characters performing courageous deeds, including a very respectfully portrayed Arab Muslim character, notable given the film’s release only eight years after the Gulf War and six years after the World Trade Center Bombing.

However, following the September 11 terrorist attacks, the American sense of invincibility was shaken. Distrust towards Muslims and Arabs grew, along with distrust and anger towards the Bush administration, and by 2007 the public’s cynicism and anxiety were easily visible in Robert Zemeckis’ *Beowulf*. Zemeckis’ *Beowulf* is little more than a liar hungry for glory, leading a band of thugs and fighting an almost pitiful, childlike enemy that was the sole responsibility of a drunken, idiotic king. There is no heroism to be found in Zemeckis’ film; indeed, as an aged Beowulf remarks dejectedly to his friend and eventual doomed successor Wiglaf, “The age of heroes is dead.”

#### **Optimism and Muslims in *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior***

An adaptation that is notable for its far more optimistic and heroic tone than others analyzed from this period is *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior*, a film adaptation of Michael Crichton’s *Eaters of the Dead*, released in 1999 and starring Antonio Banderas. Although *Eaters of the Dead* was not

a direct adaptation of the original poem, it contained a retelling of large parts of the *Beowulf* story, including Beowulf as a character himself, so its film adaptation shall be considered given its relevance to the Gulf War. The film follows an Arab explorer and scholar named Ahmed Ibn Fahdlan and his travels with a group of Norsemen, ending with a climactic battle against the savage cannibal tribe the Wendol, who have been terrorizing the Norsemen.

The film's portrayal of Ahmed is positive, according to IslamiCity film critic Salaam Khaliq: "It dresses Arab Muslims in dignified robes and pulls the rug from beneath tired Hollywood stereotypes...Ahmed Ibn Fahdlan is noble, elegant, smart, perceptive and above all religious." Ahmed's character, and by extension, the Arab world and culture, including Islam, were treated with respect despite opinion polls from recent years indicating a low level of trust towards Muslims and Arabs amongst Americans. According to Gallup, a March 1993 poll conducted shortly after the World Trade center bombing displayed that 32 percent of Americans had unfavorable opinions toward Arabs, while only 39 percent had favorable opinions (Jones). 60 percent of those polled said in a later 1998 survey that Arab-Americans were more loyal to Arab countries than to the US (Jones). 61 percent of Americans later said in a 2001 poll that entering the Gulf War was worthwhile (Moore). While there is a lack of data regarding US opinion towards Muslims and Arabs in the years surrounding the film's release (the bulk of the data came from 1991 following the Gulf War, 1993 following the World Trade Center bombing, or 2001 following the September 11 attacks) it is reasonable to assume that it was still uneasy at best. Perhaps the sentiments of mistrust explain why Antonio Banderas was chosen to play an Arab character, rather than an ethnically authentic actor. What's more, John McTiernan also directed *The Hunt for Red October*, a movie filmed during the Cold war that nonetheless portrayed a Soviet submarine captain sympathetically (and with an actor that was not Russian in

the least; Sean Connery) so it could also be reasonably assumed that McTiernan continued this trend by choosing Banderas to help the audience sympathize with a character they might not have otherwise. While the film is not, strictly speaking, a wartime adaptation, its positive tone helps to draw a sharper contrast with the 2007 film adaptation, elevating the already clear anti-Iraq War subtext to an undeniably visible status. The positive tone can be viewed through the portrayal of Ahmed, the writing concerning the relationships between the characters, and the writing concerning the actions of the characters.

Firstly, Ahmed is written as intelligent, resourceful, and pious man. Particularly, his piety and religious differences helps him bond with his fellow travelers, both as a subject of mockery, such as when he calls a Northman who insulted his mother “a pig eating son of a whore” and more importantly, a bonding experience, such as when Ahmed prays before the climactic battle alongside Northmen. His intelligence is shown when he learns the language of the Northmen through observation, and from his ability to write and read, which the Northmen lack. His resourcefulness is displayed when he surprises the Northmen with the speed and discipline of his smaller horse to win their respect in the beginning of the film, and when he uses a grindstone to remake a heavy longsword into a scimitar that he is more suited to.

Secondly, the characters exchange many humorous lines and grow to like and respect each other by the end of the film. Importantly, they respect each other enough to mock each other’s religious differences by the end of the film. Herger teases Ahmed that “In your land one God may be enough, but here we have need of many. I will pray to all of them for you. Do not be offended!” The characters also share many serious scenes in which they display their camaraderie and understanding of each other’s motivations. When the glory-hungry Beowulf (whose name has been changed to Buliwyf) worries that he shall die as a pauper, Ahmed joins

King Hrothgar in reassuring him that “A man might be thought wealthy if someone were to draw the story of his deeds, that they may be remembered.”

Finally, the score, writing, and directing all lend the battle scenes, particularly the final battle, an air of heroism and bravery. Buliwyf dies sitting upon a wooden structure that resembles a throne—a king in death, if not in life. A stirring score swells as Ahmed bids farewell to his friends and sails back to his homeland. This adaptation, with its comforting and reassuring themes of loyalty and honor, can be reasonably interpreted as America’s response to being the world’s sole superpower by the late 90’s when the film was written and released. The economic boom of the decade, combined with the cultural flourishing and beginnings of globalization, contributed to a sense of togetherness and optimism that is seen in every smile of the characters and heard in every note of the heroic soundtrack. Tragically, these high spirits would soon find themselves reduced to ashes, following the traumatic September 11 attacks and the ensuing Iraq War, leaving only a cynical, afraid, and angry populace to call helplessly for a hero that never came.

### **Mistrust and Conspiracy in Augustyn’s *Beowulf: Gods and Monsters***

A final adaptation from the post-Cold War era of combat is Brian Augustyn’s 2005 comic *Beowulf: Gods and Monsters*. Although the comic can be compared to Bingham’s because of its similar lack of subtlety, it has much more in common with *Grendel* and Zemeckis’ *Beowulf* as a means of criticizing the American government.

The comic reimagines Beowulf as a modern day superhero, towering above everyone else, with a handgun and sword strapped to his person. However, one of Beowulf’s explicit goals is to cooperate with local police in finding, containing, or neutralizing other people with superhuman abilities. It is clear that Beowulf maintains a secret identity and generally tries to

avoid open combat. He is first seen in a recollection of an old man's experience in World War II that he is telling to his daughter on his deathbed. Beowulf is portrayed in an American military uniform, killing scores of German soldiers and shrugging off dozens of bullets and even a lightning strike. Beowulf rescues the storyteller and his unit, and leads them back to base. The old man swears that "I'm convinced that that mystery man kept tabs on me, checking up now and again over the years" (7). This usage of Beowulf as a recurring symbol of hope and strength is very similar to his usage by Bryher and Read in their respective works, so it is reasonable to assume that the authors intend for Beowulf to serve as a similar nationalist rallying flag in America's post 9/11 age of crisis and insecurity. However, Beowulf is never seen in military uniform again, and displays a great reluctance to work with government. When a detective named Kenyon tells Beowulf, "We've got something that might interest you" (14), Beowulf responds brusquely with "Probably not," (14) and Kenyon has to mention that the police's current problem involves a super human vigilante to get Beowulf to work with him. This characterization reflects not only American individualism found in most superheroes but also a sense of alienation and mistrust in government.

In the comic, the government is implied to be almost completely under the control of an Illuminati-type organization called the Knights of Blood, who seek out super humans and murder them, ostensibly to maintain public order. Agents of the Knights of Blood, such as their leader Gauchere, dress like stereotypical "Men in Black" and claim to represent the Department of Homeland Security. Notably, the DHS was created in response to the September 11 terror attacks, and many citizens view their activities as unconstitutional. For the authors to align their villains with the DHS speaks to strongly held negative public opinions towards the government and the DHS in particular, especially regarding their surveillance and anti-terror activities. When

confronting Gauchere at the crime scene, after the would-be vigilante superhero accidentally creates a hostage situation, Beowulf asks Gauchere if “The Knights of Blood [are] looking for a new toy?” (16). The agent replies “Now play nice, Wulfy. Everyone knows that the Knights are a myth. I’m here for Homeland Security” (16). Beowulf’s terse reply is “Another myth. Stay out of my way” (17). After Gauchere manipulates the negotiations so that the vigilante is shot dead by police, Beowulf remarks that the Knights of Blood, and by extension, the government, “are trying to stoke the public’s fear of the unknown” (22). This attitude is similar to one shared by much of the population regarding the federal government’s perceived tendency to exploit terror attacks to obtain greater power.

*Beowulf: Gods and Monsters* also extends its anger towards the government’s treatment of returning veterans. As aforementioned, 2005 was the year when public opinion towards the Iraq war began to skew negatively, and it was also the year of the comic’s publication. It was also the year in which controversies over government mismanagement of the Department of Veteran’s Affairs, and subsequent mismanagement or denial of medical care to returning Iraq veterans, reached a head with the release of a report from the office of the Inspector General for the VA, which admitted that “Schedulers Did Not Follow Established Procedures for Creating Appointments” (2005 Wait Time Review, 4), “Medical Facilities Did Not Have Effective Electronic Waiting List Procedures” (5), “VHA Did Not Have an Adequate Training Program for Schedulers” (6), and “Outpatient Scheduling Procedures Need Improvement Nationwide” (6). These frustrations with the government’s ability to care for its soldiers are visible in issue 2 of *Gods and Monsters*, in which Beowulf infiltrates a secret facility on Minuit Island dedicated to containing super humans for research and cruel experiments. The crumbling ruins of the 19<sup>th</sup> century era hospital, combined with the images of violence and injury displayed by the prisoners,

speak to public fears about the government's abuse of its citizens and soldiers. More explicitly, Beowulf finds a normal man named Trent in one of the prison cells, who remarks bitterly: "Spent two years in Iraq for the U.S., and came home to this. Makes a brother proud" (21). After Beowulf throws the government agents and researchers into the prison cells, Trent remarks "They need to pay for what they've done here" (22). Beowulf reassures him: "Don't worry, Trent. They will" (22). Beowulf's words seek to calm a public clamoring for greater government accountability following the failures of the VA. Although the following issues would focus more on the supernatural aspects of *Gods and Monsters*' universe, Gauchere and the government agents continue to remain adversaries. For the creators of the comic, the American surveillance state, and its bureaucratic failures, weren't likely to end soon.

### **Cynicism and War Weariness in Zemeckis' *Beowulf***

Perhaps the most initially seemingly outlandish adaptations of *Beowulf* analyzed by this thesis is Robert Zemeckis' 2007 film *Beowulf*, filmed entirely with motion capture technology. A financial and critical failure, the film was widely regarded as lowbrow and a farcical rendition of the Old English poem. Notably, the complaints centered on the sexualization of Grendel's mother—played by an almost nude Angelina Jolie—and the lack of heroism present in Beowulf himself, who is portrayed as a violent man who lies about past accomplishments in an attempt for fame. Again, on first glance, the film appears to have little to offer regarding analysis or opportunities for insight into American attitudes towards war.

However, upon closer examination, the film offers an incredibly detailed reflection of American cynicism and war-weariness following the Iraq War, lingering trauma over the September 11 terrorist attacks, and anxiety over the political future of the country. To begin with, the character of Beowulf is radically different from almost every other portrayal discussed in this

thesis. He is demonstrated through a flashback to be easily seduced by a beautiful siren after his battle with the sea monsters, and easily lies to cover his weakness, claiming to have “stabbed the beast in the heart.” Later, after being seduced by Grendel’s mother, he again lies that he has killed her. Unlike the poem, Beowulf is also strongly implied to have impregnated Grendel’s mother, with a creature that eventually becomes the man/dragon shapeshifter seen at the end of the film.

What could have been the motivation for the film’s creators to reinterpret Beowulf as a liar? A strong case can be made that Beowulf, in fact, represents America and how it saw itself after an extremely traumatic terror attack and close to a decade of bloody Iraqi occupation. Like Beowulf, America was and remains militaristic, with a great deal of national pride derived from the defeat of past enemies, such as Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. But like Beowulf, these accomplishments gave rise to a sense of invincibility and superiority that are challenged by sudden and traumatic attacks, combined with a sense of weariness and defeat. Andrew Larson, an historian and blogger, wrote in his blog *An Historian Goes to the Movies* that, “Seeing the film in the theater in 2007, I was struck by how much the film read as a critique of contemporary American politics, with political leaders whose ‘Missions Accomplished’ are little more than hollow boasts covering up miserable failures that got lots of good people killed. But maybe that was just the mood I was in at the time” (Larson). It is very significant that a *Beowulf* scholar and part time amateur film critic recognized the political undertones in the movie. Larson was not alone in his feelings about the war; according to New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd, writing in July 2007: “The Iraq war [Condoleezza Rice] helped sell has turned into Grendel, devouring everything in sight and making it uninhabitable. It has ravaged Iraq, Bush’s presidency, the federal budget, the Republican majority, American invincibility and integrity,

and now, John McCain's chance to be president. And there's no Beowulf in sight" (Dowd). Furthermore, a Pew Research poll found that by March 2006, 49 percent of the public believed that entering the war was the wrong decision, while 45 percent supported it. By the end of the year, the numbers would change to 54 and 38, respectively. The same poll found that by March 2007, 56 percent of the public felt that the war was either going "Not too well" or "Not well at all", with only 40 percent having the opposite view. (Pew)

Clearly, the public had soured on the war, and this dissent was noted in the film. Beowulf can be interpreted as a stand-in for America or George W. Bush, given the film's inability to decide whether to portray him heroically or not. Like Bush, Beowulf inherits an old enemy (Iraq and the legacy of the Gulf War) and is seduced by promises of great wealth and power for his people. However, the decision has great consequences-for Beowulf, the dragon; for Bush, the recession and loss of public support.

Beowulf can also be viewed as representative of America as a whole, especially once he has aged. While viewing his men fight a battle, an old and disgraced King Beowulf remarks to Wiglaf that "This is not battle, Wiglaf. This is slaughter." It is eerily similar to the kind of rhetoric used by opponents of the war while watching the technologically and numerically superior US force fighting insurgents in Iraq, further underscored by the next line: "We men are monsters now. The time of heroes is dead...leaving humankind with nothing but weeping martyrs, fear, and shame." The guilt and shame felt in Beowulf's words easily describe the public's feelings after several years of bloody war. But if the film is a reflection on American attitudes towards its current military engagements, what significance does the ending-the end of the wars, lies, and leadership-hold?

The adaptation is unique amongst all others studied in this thesis due to its emphasis on Wiglaf, which does not become apparent until the very end. After the newly crowned Wiglaf watches Beowulf's body burn, he spies Grendel's mother's cursed drinking horn on the beach. Silently, Grendel's mother rises partially from the water, in human form, beckoning to him with her eyes. Wiglaf's expression is cautious, and the film ends with a shot of his face, frozen in mistrust and apprehension. Crucially, the film was released less than one year before the 2008 presidential election. As President Bush was cast out of the public eye, visibly older and more worn like his Beowulf counterpart, the American people turned with a mixture of dread and pessimism to the next president, or Bush's Wiglaf figure. Would the new "king" make the same mistakes and be defeated by the same weaknesses? Would the people see their fortunes restored or was the end of the "kingdom" upon them at last? Only time would tell, and will tell.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

What do all these adaptations have in common? Specifically, what single factor, if any, motivated their creation? *The Postmodern Beowulf*, a collection of essays analyzing *Beowulf* and its adaptations, sheds light on the subject. An excerpt from James W Earl's essay, "*Beowulf* and the Origins of Civilization", reads "Thus *Beowulf* (like the Old Testament, but unlike the classical epics) has its deep silences-so much is left unsaid!-in which we can hardly help but read ourselves, and out of which we draw our interpretations..." (VII). The authors' inclusion of this excerpt would seem to indicate that *Beowulf*'s inherent fluid qualities simply leave it open to many different interpretations and appropriations. Indeed, editor Eileen Joy notes in the book's preface that "Ultimately, this book cannot deliver a neatly pragmatic or even a whole view of the 'state of theory' in *Beowulf* studies at present, for we are still living and working in this moment-a moment, moreover, of constant and continual theoretical upheaval and change" (XXIII). That being said, the authors provide several possibilities that provide adequate explanations for the existence of the adaptations analyzed in this thesis, from a specific mechanism of preserving English cultural values, to an expression of desire for return to traditional forms of hierarchy, to a call for an end to cycles of repeated violence-all of which can be classified as what must be the broad, singular purpose of all *Beowulf* adaptations (and wartime adaptations in particular), which is to serve as "a cultural response...with a power to reconfigure our understanding of the present world and our present selves" (LVI).

Firstly, Joy and her fellow editor Mary Ramsey note that literary theorist Terry Eagleton has described *Beowulf* "as a poem both subtle and savage [that] ultimately retains its pride of

place in English studies mainly due to its function, from the Victorian period forward, as the cultural tool of a troubling nationalist romance with an archetypal and mythological past” (XXX). This explanation would provide a clear motivation for both Bryher’s novel and Read’s inclusion of the poem in his anthology: the desire to preserve English culture from German invaders seeking to destroy it. This is further reinforced by Joy’s observation that “Even to its original, let’s say tenth-or eleventh-century audiences, *Beowulf* was also already past, a work of artistic *looking-back* that, by its very nature, speaks to the desire to have the past, however *fallen* and *over*, to speak to the present moment and be relevant to it...there is always a kind of tension in the poem, then, between the hope, articulated within narrative (in all the stories within the story) that a certain kind of remembering will secure a better future” (XXXV). Just as Hrothgar advises Beowulf to learn from the mistakes of the chieftain Heremod, so did the British appropriators of the poem want their countrymen and government to learn from the mistakes of the past, and use that “remembering” to secure a better future for the nation.

Similarly, the past-seeking motives of the nationalist adaptations can also be found in the adaptations from the Cold War, such as Bingham’s comic and *The Legacy of Heorot*. In the case of Bingham, the “markedly antifeminist poem” (Earl) was used to encourage a return to traditional masculinity, in the hopes that doing so would secure the United States as a, if not the, dominant world military power. In *Heorot*, the message is not so much a desire for a return to traditional forms of gender supremacy as it is a desire for unquestioning loyalty to the “tribe” or a return to strict hierarchy, apparent in how easily the human colonists begin to kill the grendels following Cadmann’s reorganization of the colony into a quasi-dictatorship, where his rule is law. Earl, quoting Freud’s studies on group psychology, writes “From the first, there were two kinds of psychologies, that of the individual members of the group and that of the father, chief,

or leader. The members of the group were subject to ties just as we see them today, but the father of the primal horde was free. His intellectual acts were strong and independent even in isolation, and his will needed no reinforcement from others” (Earl). Who embodies this kind of strong, unquestionable leadership better than Bingham’s stoic Beowulf or Niven’s dominant Cadmann? Earl continues: “It was to an audience of warrior aristocrats like Byrtnoth and his men that heroic poetry was traditionally addressed. This audience certainly promoted this concept generally, in an effort to keep society tightly bound to them by vows of unquestioning obedience” (Earl). For the adaptations written as conservative reactions to social changes in the 60’s and 80’s, particularly egalitarian movements that threatened hierarchy, *Beowulf* was an attractive work to appropriate.

For the Soviet author Hulpach and pacifist Americans Gardner and Nye, *Beowulf* may have been used to articulate a call for an end to the violence and unrest that engulfed their societies at their times of writing. In her essay “Enjoyment of Violence and Desire for History in *Beowulf*”, Janet Thormann proposes that the poem “works towards imagining a history that will limit the deadly repetitions of feud. The narratives of the Geats’ feud with the Frisians and the Swedes, because they can only lead to their own repetition...open up the possibility of another history that would be organized by the principle of law” (Thorman). For the war-weary writers of the Cold War, *Beowulf* allowed them to vent their frustrations over endless war-from Gardner’s criticisms of humanity’s violent tendencies to Nye’s rejection of depicting violence-and to portray better futures where disputes were resolved peacefully-such as in Nye’s work-or where collectivist ideals allow formerly squabbling comrades to vanquish their enemies, such as in Hulpach’s adaptation.

But what happens when there are no more enemies to rally against? What does the poem's use become when victory and stability are certain, such as for the post-Cold War adaptations from America? In her introduction to the collection, Joy notes that Eagleton proposes that "*Beowulf* may no longer be relevant to us, 'because we no longer believe in heroism'...and the epic poem, 'as Marx once observed, requires historical conditions which the steam-engine and telegraph put paid to'" (XXXI). The brief optimism of the Soviet collapse, so powerful and apparent in McTiernan's *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior*, would collapse similarly following the 9/11 terror attacks. In the subsequent insecurity and depression caused by the attacks, many Americans would most likely agree with Zemeckis' *Beowulf* that "the age of heroes is dead." Reflections of this sentiment can be seen in Augustyn's renderings of superheroes literally being murdered, or ostracized to the point of dehumanization, all while *Beowulf* struggles vainly to save them, himself an isolated figure living on the fringes of society, threatened by obscurity. Earl recounts that J.R.R. Tolkien, in his analysis of heroism in 1936, noted that "'we may remember that the poet of *Beowulf* saw clearly: the wages of heroism is death'" (Earl). In the postmodern era, without the comforting lens of religion through which death can be trivialized, it is safe to say that many view those wages as too high.

Yet this need not mean an end to *Beowulf* adaptations and study. John D Niles, in his contribution "Locating *Beowulf* in Literary History", argues that "the poetic tradition of which *Beowulf* is an example served as one important means by which a culture defined itself, validated itself, and maintained its equilibrium through strategic adaptations during a period of major change" (Niles). He later suggests that "Rather than reflecting the static conditions of a single or simple age, *Beowulf* represents a broad collective response to changes that affected a complex society during a period of major crisis and transformation" (Niles). These statements provide the

common factor behind all wartime adaptations—a very basic human need for stability and comprehension of the larger, chaotic world. This hypothesis is confirmed by the book’s introduction, which explains the editors’ choice of photograph for the cover, a Gulf War photo of a charred Kuwaiti soldier’s hand, upon which gleams an unharmed gold ring: “And this is why we chose for the cover of our book the Peter Tunley photograph from the first Gulf War of a dead Kuwaiti soldier’s hand resting flat in the sand of the desert...why this photograph? According to Bruce Gilchrist, who found the photograph first and brought it to our attention, ‘It speaks in the synecdochic language of war, the traumatic effect of violence and the frank horror it creates in us as witnesses; it is only a wrist and a hand, partially ruined by fire, as is the *Beowulf* manuscript, as is Beowulf’s pyre...and yet, that same wrist and hand also bear an intact material object that will outlive its bearer: the gold ring...this ring sets up the possibility of story, of inscription, and the renewal of violence in the urgency for revenge” (LV). Wartime adapters, from World War II to the present day, lived or continue to live under the constant specter of fear, harm, loss, and death. *Beowulf* acts as a kind of coping mechanism, where adapters’ anxieties—like those of the viewers of the charred hand—can be raised and addressed in a context entirely under the control of the adapter, allowing for an outlet where those anxieties can be faced safely, while allowing glimpses, however pessimistic or optimistic, into the future—glimpses personified by the resilience and shine of the gold ring.

As of the writing of this thesis, no new major adaptations with sudden popularity, obvious ideological agendas, or significant deviations from the source material have been written or filmed. America has reduced its involvement in Iraq and no major wars have occurred elsewhere in the world. If only for a short while, the world has no need for *Beowulf*. But if the rise of nationalism in Europe calls for old legends to inflame the passions of the people, will

*Beowulf* answer the call? If new superpowers rise to battle for global dominance, will they voice their fears and desires with *Beowulf* as did so many countries before them? And if a new sole global power replaces the American hegemony, will it age and wither under the heavy mantle of leadership as did the United States before it? The future may be uncertain, but about one thing there can be no doubt: if there indeed comes a time when the people expect-or endure- war, then *Beowulf* will return with it.

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