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BULIWYF FOR BEOWULF: MICHAEL CRICHTON'S *EATERS OF THE DEAD*

Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* (1976) is a retelling of Old English *Beowulf* considered here from the perspective of narrative techniques: balancing factuality and fictionality, the first-person narrator, and the changes of the narrative distance, which function to recapture the historical and mythical appeal of the original heroic epic, and to reduce the estrangement of the contemporary reader from the epic world of *Beowulf*.

KEYWORDS: Beowulf, Michael Crichton, Eaters of the Dead, narrative techniques, narrator

Beowulf is not only a venerable relic of Old English literature and culture but also a living part of Britain's heritage. This has been so at least since 1936 when Professor J.R.R. Tolkien in "*Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*" called for the appreciation of *Beowulf* as both a source for historical and philological researches as well as a powerful artistic work. His view of the poem as possessed of logical composition and symbolic significance contributed to the appreciation of the heroic story of the monster-slaying champion and its gradual penetration into contemporary culture as part of a vital literary tradition. The importance of *Beowulf* is amply testified by the appearance of ever new translations, retellings and adaptations in a great variety of modes. Thus there are new literary versions of *Beowulf*, as well as film adaptations, graphic novels, games, and even musical pieces and operas.¹ It has to be added that the relations among the versions in various modes are complex and interesting in their own right: the opera *Grendel* (2006) is not based directly on the Old English poem *Beowulf*, but on the 1971 novel by John Gardner entitled *Grendel*; similarly the feature film *The Thirteenth Warrior* is an adaptation of Michael Crichton's version of *Beowulf* entitled *Eaters*

¹ Compare John William Sutton's extensive collection of *Beowulfiana: Modern Adaptations of Beowulf* at the University of Rochester, which focuses on "adaptations, retellings, and transformations into new media" listing books, comics, music, films, games and scholarship. Sutton observes: "The collection continues to grow at a steady pace, often leading me to marvel at the extent to which *Beowulf* has permeated twentieth- and twenty-first-century Anglophone culture" (<http://www.library.rochester.edu/robbins/beowulfiana>; access 27.02.2016).

of the *Dead* from 1976; a contrary relationship obtains between Robert Zemeckis's movie adaptation of *Beowulf* (written by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary) released in 2007 and Caitlin R. Kiernan's novel *Beowulf* which is a movie tie-in book published in the same year. One should also mention numerous retellings aimed at the young audience of various age groups, such as, for instance, Rosemary Sutcliff's *Dragon Slayer* (1961).

It is probably true, however, that the popularity of *Beowulf*'s adaptations, especially the film versions with their international audiences, far surpasses the readership of the epic poem itself – even in modern translation – so that *Beowulf*'s secure place in the cultural and literary tradition seems to rest not so much on the poem itself as on its modern retellings. This, on the one hand, emphasises the great “gap of time” dividing us from the original text and world of *Beowulf* and, on the other hand, points to its endless interpretability – both in the sense of new critical readings and in the sense of new artistic texts based on the poem. The purpose of this article is to examine one of the novelistic adaptations of *Beowulf*: a 1976 novel entitled *Eaters of the Dead* written by Michael Crichton (1942-2008), an American author of numerous bestsellers, including the famous *Jurassic Park* (1990). My aims in this article are twofold. Firstly I intend to show how *Eaters of the Dead* reproduces or reworks several features of Old English *Beowulf* in an attempt to revive for the modern reader the experience of the receiver of the original heroic epic. Secondly I will consider how the narrator's stance serves to capture and reshape the reactions of the modern reader to the heroic world of the past. I will start with delineating some similarities and differences between *Beowulf* and *Eaters of the Dead*, then I will discuss the literary techniques and narrative strategies of the novel.

The main plot of Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* concerns the warrior Buliwyf who sets out with a company of twelve to help king Rothgar against the mysterious enemy who ravages his kingdom. Buliwyf fights the monstrous wendol in Rothgar's hall Hurot, then defends the whole of the settlement against the fiery dragon, eventually kills the wendol's mother, but dies of wounds inflicted by her and is ceremoniously buried. However, in spite of obvious similarities of characters, plot and settings, there are many significant differences between *Beowulf* and *Eaters of the Dead* such as the modifications of names (visible in the above synopsis), the events, the choice of the title, or the organization of narration.

The retellings of *Beowulf* either follow its plot in presenting all three encounters of the hero with monstrous antagonists or else focus on the initial sequence of Grendel and his mother as a more compact and logical plot development. Michael Crichton has it both ways: in his novel the episode concerning the fire dragon, called Korgon (Crichton 1997: 97, 111), is fully integrated with Buliwyf's attempts to protect Rothgar, and in fact represents his struggle with another form of the “wendol” attack. In this way the three heroic encounters are all connected with one formidable task and concern the same enemy. They are also given additional

coherence by greater spatial and temporal unity, which in the original epic applies only to the first two fights. Crichton's shifting of the fire drake's attack to the second episode (instead of the third as in *Beowulf*) gives a greater compositional prominence to the hero's final encounter with the mother.

The novel's (main) title can be seen as a measure of distance from the epic poem since it does not suggest any connection to the Old English *Beowulf* – in contrast, for example, to John Gardner's *Grendel* whose title clearly, though mainly to the knowledgeable, signals the link. One similarity linking the novels by Gardner and Crichton is their focus on the adversary, as opposed to the hero. The title *Grendel* definitely addresses our contemporary fascination with the monstrous other. This aspect is also present in Crichton's choice of the title, which additionally carries a suggestion of horror and thus reveals the novel's affinity with popular fiction.

Although Crichton's book certainly contains elements of horror in its descriptions of torn human bodies, severed heads and human bones crunching underfoot, horror is not its dominant genre convention. Actually *Eaters of the Dead* represents a complex generic structure linking horror elements with adventure story, travel narrative, ethnographic account and alternative history. Even though this generic complexity may be seen as quite a modern trait, in actual fact genre mixture can be treated as a normal feature of literary texts in all cultural periods. If we accept such a view, then *Beowulf* may also be perceived as mixing different genres: using the poetic vehicle of verse it tells of heroic adventures in both historical and mythical² aspects, but also concerns genealogies of important figures as well as historically grounded explanations of tribal feuds. Consequently *Beowulf* may be seen as having a multiple appeal for its original intended audience: both historical and mythical, factual and artistic. Even if genre mixture does not seem a convincing point of similarity between the two texts, the fact that the modern novel employs non-fictional genres (travel narrative with strong ethnographic elements) together with the fictional conventions of adventure story and horror story may be considered as an attempt to recapture the reliance of the *Beowulf* narrative on both historical and mythical aspects. Moreover, the mixture of factual and fictional genres in the modern novel serves to reproduce for the modern audience the epic's reception effects.

In addition to generic complexity both texts also include or rely on other stories. *Beowulf* features numerous embedded narratives. Some of them, such as Beowulf's story of his contest with Breca or the hero's narratives of his fights presented to Hrothgar and to Hygelac, clearly belong to the plot of the epic poem. Other embedded narratives have their sources outside the story of Beowulf: the most famous of these are certainly the song of "Sigemund's exploits" (l. 875) and

² The notion of myth is employed in this article in a broad sense of stories "through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origins of human or natural phenomena" (Baldick 2004: 164).

“the saga of Finn and his sons” (l. 1067)³, as well as the song of creation (l. 90-98) based on the Book of Genesis (Grubbs 2014: 39).

Crichton’s novel only occasionally includes embedded narratives, whether connected with the plot or based on outside sources.⁴ Much more important is its reliance on outside texts. Apart from the obvious relation to the Old English *Beowulf* as a source of characters and events, the novel’s subtitle explicitly names another textual source: *The Manuscript of Ibn Fadlan, Relating to His Experiences with the Northmen in A.D. 922*. Ibn Fadlan’s narrative in Crichton’s novel convincingly opens with a 5-line prayer of praise: “Praise be to God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, the Lord of the Two Worlds, and blessing and peace upon the Prince of Prophets, our Lord and Master Muhammad...” (Crichton 1993: 13). In the second paragraph the narrator introduces himself and explains the content of his book:

This is the book of Ahmad ibn-Fadlan, ibn-al-Abbas, ibn-Rasid, ibn-Hammad, a client of Muhammad ibn-Sulayman, the ambassador from al-Muqtadir to the King of the Saqaliba, in which he recounts what he saw in the land of the Turks, the Hazars, the Saqaliba, the Bskirs, the Rus, and the Northmen, of the histories of their kings and the way they act in many affairs of their life.

(1993: 13)

Then the narrator explains how he became a member of the ambassador’s party and proceeds to describe the journey:

So we started on Thursday, the 11th of Safar of the year 309 [June 21, 921] from the City of Peace [Bagdad]. We stopped a day in Nahrawan, and from there went swiftly until we reached Daskara, where we stopped for three days. Then we travelled straight onward without any detours until we reached Hulwan. There we stayed two days. From there we went to Qirmisin...

(1993: 15)

The travel narrative goes on to trace the route of the expedition always providing detailed accounts of the journey, weather conditions, clothing and equipment required, tribes encountered on the way with their leaders or representatives, gifts exchanged, negotiations, dangers, and problems. Especially in the first chapters the tone of detailed factual report is predominant.

³ In all references to *Beowulf* I employ Seamus Heaney’s translation from 1999. For easier identification of passages I refer to line numbers of the poem, and not to page numbers of the book. The story of Sigemund is told in lines 884-898; the Finsburgh fight is narrated in lines 1070-1158.

⁴ Ibn Fadlan mentions telling the Viking warriors an Estern fable of “Abu Kssim’s slippers, which all know” (Crichton 1993: 82). The fable then is printed in italics and in a narrower column than the main text, which suggests an intrusion from the authorial figure of the editor of Ibn Fadlan’s manuscript. In this way the reader is offered the embedded story, but its insertion is the responsibility of the “editor” and not of the narrator (i.e. Ibn Fadlan).

Moreover, Ibn Fadlan carefully records customs and beliefs. For example, in the chapter “The Ways of the Oguz Turks” he describes the Oguz dwellings, their hygienic habits, hospitality, women’s clothing and behaviour, attitudes to adultery and homosexuality, marriage customs, attitudes to sickness and death, and burial customs (Crichton 1993: 21-24). In another passage he explains the Northmen’s values and beliefs:

They are pleased when any man dies a warrior’s death. Also the opposite is held true by them; they show distress when a man dies in his sleep, or in a bed. They say of such a man: ‘He died as a cow in the straw.’ This is no insult, but it is a reason for mourning the death. [...] Any man who dies in his sleep is said by them to be strangled by the maran, or mare of the night. This creature is a woman, which makes such a death shameful, for to die at the hands of a woman is degrading above all things.

(1993: 95-96)

Ibn Fadlan’s narrative abounds in geographic and ethnographic details, and may even seem to be overloaded with them. Evidently this mode of narrating serves to establish the factual colouring of the novel, which in my view serves to reflect the historical grounding of many names and details in the Old English *Beowulf*.

Additionally, the claim of historicity in *Eaters of the Dead* is further augmented by paratextual means. The narrative of Ibn Fadlan is actually preceded by 7 pages of Introduction providing information about the 10th century Arabic author and about his manuscript which has survived in fragments, transcripts and translations. The author of the Introduction presents himself as an editor of a literal translation from the 1950s: “In preparing this full and annotated version of the *Fraus-Dolus* translation, I have made few alterations. I deleted some repetitive passages [...]. I changed paragraph structure [...]. Finally, I have occasionally altered the original syntax [...].” (Crichton 1993: 3). Also the “editor’s” remarks from time to time interrupt the flow of Ibn Fadlan’s narrative explaining the reasons for omitting long lists of place-names and distances (1993: 15), preventing the reader’s confusion about geography (1993: 51), supplying a story Ibn Fadlan thinks too well-known to retell (1993: 83-5), and finally explaining the abrupt ending of the story in mid-sentence as resulting from the incomplete state of the manuscript (1993: 173-4). Moreover, the appearance of factuality is further strengthened by the addition of footnotes commenting on Ibn Fadlan’s style, explaining some words and expressions he uses occasionally providing Arabic or Latin originals, quoting from various scholars who deal either with the manuscript or with the peoples and cultures described therein, often correcting their mistakes or misconceptions. In total there are 45 footnotes (some of them almost covering a whole page with minute print) on 161 pages of Ibn Fadlan’s narrative. The footnotes not only enhance the authenticity of the “editor’s” claims, but also distract the reader (should he/she wish to follow them) from the suspenseful appeal of the thrilling story. The same distracting role is performed by the “editor’s” intrusions into Ibn Fadlan’s narrative since they tend to prevent

the reader from immersing themselves in the fictional world by reminding them of the textual layer. Furthermore, the main narrative is followed by an “Appendix”, a list of “Sources”, and “A Factual Note on *Eaters of the Dead*”.

Obviously, the claim of factuality in a novel – openly marketed as fiction and written by a famous author of bestselling thrillers – must be taken by the reader as part of the literary game for at least two reasons. Firstly, the apparently factual narrative of Ibn Fadlan contains the story which by means of characters’ names, settings and events reveals itself as a retelling of one of the best known texts of English literature: *Beowulf*. Secondly, the motif of an old manuscript is a well-established literary convention and as such introduces the tension between the fictionality of the narrated story and its claims to factuality rather than straightforwardly confirming the book’s factual truth. However, a reader who will take trouble to check the name of Ibn Fadlan in some outside source is bound to be surprised: the narrator of *Eaters of the Dead* turns out to be an historically authentic figure, while his manuscript is a valued source of reliable knowledge. As confirmed by Judith Gabriel in an article published in *Aramco World. Arabic and Islamic cultures and connections*: “Ibn Fadlan was a *faqih*, an expert in Islamic jurisprudence, who served as secretary of a delegation sent by Caliph al-Muqtadir in 921 to the king of the Bulgars, who had requested help building a fort and a mosque, as well as personal instruction in the teachings of Islam” (Gabriel). An article from *Muslim Heritage* entitled “Scandinavia and Ibn Fadlan” states: “Ibn Fadlan’s description of Northern Europe and Scandinavia has been analysed and commented upon frequently and forms the substance of many observations on the study of the ethnography and sociology of the peoples concerned” (Scandinavia).

However, the tension between the factuality and fictionality in *Eaters of the Dead* is more complex than it may initially appear as it involves several levels of narration. On the most basic level of the first-person narrator and the narratee, the story told by Ibn Fadlan is obviously factual. The level of the “editor” of the old Arabic manuscript introduces the tension between the claims of factuality strengthened by the scholarly apparatus of learned footnotes and comments on the one hand, and the recognition of the manuscript convention as a literary, and thus fictitious, device on the other hand. The final section of the novel, “The Factual Note on *Eaters of the Dead*”, introduces a new level of paratextuality: while all the previously considered paratextual materials belong to the “editor”, the final section is evidently written by the author himself and is particularly focused on the interplay of fact and fiction. In the penultimate paragraph of this section, the author explains: “I should perhaps say explicitly that the references in this afterword are genuine. The rest of the novel, including its introduction, text, footnotes, and bibliography, should properly be viewed as fiction” (Crichton 1993: 186).⁵ Though

⁵ It must be added that the afterword is dated “December, 1992” and was first appended to the 1993 edition of the book originally published in 1976.

the author renounces all claims to factuality in his novel – thus apparently resolving the tension between fact and fiction – he himself confirms the historical authenticity of Ibn Fadlan and the reliability of his travel narrative faithfully followed in the initial sections of the novel. Thus, on the authorial level the tension between fact and fiction is replayed, though a greater stress is placed on the fictionality of the narrative presented to the reader in the preceding parts of the book.

The maintaining of the fact vs. fiction tension in the novel, and especially the stress on factuality, is in my view a way of recreating the factual and fictional appeal of the Old English *Beowulf* to its original audience. The factuality of the epic most probably relied on its evocation of kings and heroes already known to the audience and relevant to their sense of identity, as well as on referring to events of historic validity. The fictionality of *Beowulf*, on the other hand, would probably have a different quality from how we now understand it⁶ and would rather be connected with the mythical or symbolic qualities of the presented story. Just as Grendel's descent from Cain places him as an emblem of evil in the mythical context of Biblical Genesis and of creatures from Germanic pagan beliefs, so Beowulf, with his qualities and deeds, clearly surpasses the merely historical and enters the realm of exalted values and timeless heroism. Though in *Beowulf* the historical and mythical aspects are complementary rather than opposed, the tension of fact and fiction in the modern novel seems to reproduce the dual appeal of the Old English epic.

Moreover, Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* also involves a mythical aspect: the monstrous adversary is transposed to a mythical context appropriate for the modern times. The monster with whom Buliwyf arrives to fight is not called Grendel in the novel but "wendol". Spelled with a low case letter, it is obviously not a proper name and is gradually revealed to be a collective noun. The wendol are different from ordinary human beings: they are more hairy and strangely proportioned. They are cannibalistic and though they are atrocious warriors they live under the matriarchal rule of their "mother". They only attack in thick mist which associates them with the powers of nature. Because they never leave their dead behind, they seem mysterious and possibly supernatural. Buliwyf's fearlessness and fighting skills contribute to gradually revealing the wendol as not only mortal, but also radically different in terms of culture and even species. Buliwyf manages to win the first two battles with the wendol, but the victories come at a high price and always bring only a temporary respite. It eventually becomes clear that the wendol can be stopped only on one condition; as a prophetic character informs Buliwyf: "To kill the wendol, you must strike at the head and the heart: you must overcome their very mother [...]" (Crichton 1993: 138).

⁶ "Something invented by the imagination or feigned; specifically: an invented story" (Merriam-Webster).

One of the contexts in which the fight with the wendol certainly participates is that of the antagonism between matriarchy and patriarchy, or the dominance of male or female principle – obviously one of the mythical structures not only of our times.⁷ However, Crichton's novel does not repeat the most common stereotype of mild and peace-loving matriarchy as opposed to brutal and belligerent patriarchy. Actually both the wendol and the Germanic warriors are described as violent and brutal, though admittedly the former are more so. The first encounter of Buliwyf's company with the carnage perpetrated by the wendol is graphically described by Ibn Fadlan:

[...] there was a man [...] whose body had been torn from limb to limb. The torso was here, an arm here, a leg here. Blood lay in thick pools upon the floor, and on the walls, on the roof, on every surface in such profusion that the house seemed to have been painted in red blood. Also there was a woman, in like fashion rended limb from limb. Also a male child, an infant of two years or less, whose head was wrenched from the shoulders, leaving the body a bleeding stump. [...] The body of the male child had been chewed by some fiendish teeth, upon the soft flesh of the back of the thigh. So also had been chewed the area of the shoulder. This horror I saw with my own eyes.

(1993: 76-7)

However, the society of the Germanic warriors is also described as shockingly violent: during Buliwyf's first feast in Rothgar's Hurot, a warrior suddenly attacks the guest from behind, trying to pierce him with a spear. Buliwyf is faster:

[He] turned, plucked up a spear, and with this he caught the warrior full into the chest, and lifted him by the shaft of the spear high over his head and flung him against the wall. Thus was this warrior skewered on the spear, his feet dangling above the floor, kicking [...]. The warrior died with a sound.

(1993: 82)

Immediately after the commotion caused by this incident, the guests start talking, the feast goes on, and Ibn Fadlan, still shocked, is asked for "a song of kings and valor in battle" (1993: 82). The apparent contrast of two differently organised societies is in fact grounded in comparable, though not identical, brutality. In this way the tension between the matriarchal and patriarchal principles suggests reflection on human nature independent of gender and social organisation.

Moreover, the conflict between the hero and the monster in *Eaters of the Dead* is placed in still another context: that of the evolutionary theory, which may be perceived as another modern myth.⁸ The evolutionary interpretation, suggested within

⁷ Compare Cynthia Eller's critique of the matriarchal myth in her book *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory* (2000). Interestingly, Beowulf's struggle with Grendel's mother is interpreted by some scholars as reflecting the overcoming of earlier matriarchal organisation of society by the more hierarchical patriarchal society dominated by kings and warriors; compare, for instance, Battaglia (1991: 415-446) or Grigsby (2005). For a survey of earlier interpretations consult Sisam (1971: 17-28).

⁸ By claiming a mythical status of the evolution theory, I do not intend to question its scientific validity but to point to its status of a comprehensive explanation of human origin and nature – a role

the narrative by the physical differences of the wendol from the human beings, is finally confirmed by the “editor” in the “Appendix: The Mist Monsters” immediately following the narrative of Ibn Fadlan. The “editor” discusses the Neanderthals in a very scholarly way and remarks:

The general reassessment of Neanderthal man coincides with the rediscovery of Ibn Fadlan’s contact with the ‘mist monsters’; his description of these creatures is suggestive of Neanderthal anatomy, and raises the question of whether the Neanderthal form did in fact, disappear from the earth thousands of years ago, or whether these early men persisted into historic times. (1993: 177).

Though the answer to the above question is not entirely conclusive in the “Appendix”, the suggestion that the wendol represent an earlier human species remains very strong. In this way Crichton’s novel suggests a reinterpretation of *Beowulf*’s monsters in the context of human evolution and extinction of some species.

An interesting relation seems to bind the narrators of the two texts under consideration. Ibn Fadlan is a first-person character-narrator (homodiegetic-autodiegetic) and as such he constitutes a strong contrast to *Beowulf*’s heterodiegetic narrator. Ibn Fadlan’s first-person narrative strengthens the verisimilitude of the presented events, especially that the narrator carefully differentiates between what he only hears about and what he sees with his own eyes. Moreover, his immersion in the events he recounts considerably shortens the narrative distance: though his narrative is evidently composed after his return to Bagdad, he never emphasises the time lapse. In contrast, the heterodiegetic narrator of *Beowulf* signals the time distance already in the first line of the poem by referring to “days gone by” (“geardagum”; l. 1) and then by deepening the time perspective by deploying the history of the Shielding rulers through several generations. However, what links both narrators is the cultural distance from the world they describe. *Beowulf*’s narrator is a Christian describing a pagan world and his religious distance is strongly marked early in the story:⁹

Sometimes at pagan shrines they vowed
offerings to idols, swore oaths
that the killer of souls might come to their aid
and save the people. That was their way,
their heathenish hope; deep in their hearts
they remembered hell. The Almighty Judge
of good deeds and bad, the Lord God,
Head of Heavens and High King of the World,
was unknown to them.

(l. 175-183)

once played by religious systems. Compare, for instance, Chris Bateman’s book *The Mythology of Evolution* from 2012.

⁹ The relation between paganism and Christianity is a complex and much debated issue in *Beowulf*; compare, for instance, Whitelock (1970), Bloomfield (1968: 68-75) or Grubbs (2014).

In spite of the religious distance, *Beowulf's* narrator fully embraces the heroic values governing the characters he describes and their way of life. As a Muslim, the character-narrator in *Eaters of the Dead* often signals his religious distance to the peoples he visits by remarking on their religious beliefs and practices, and on their attitude to his own creed and observances. Moreover, Ibn Fadlan is initially horrified by the incomprehensible brutality of the Germanic warriors, shocked by some of their customs, and disgusted by their behaviour. The modification of the proper names (Buliwyf, Rothgar, Hurot) serves to signal the narrator's distance from the language and culture of the peoples he depicts. His descriptions and comments clearly suggest a significant cultural distance to a society whose principles and values are completely alien to him.

The narrator in Crichton's novel, who is a stranger to the world he describes, may be, in my opinion, taken to represent the alienation of the modern reader from the heroic culture *Beowulf* represents. Ibn Fadlan's shocked perplexity would then express the reader's inability to fully comprehend the world of the Old English epic. However, while *Beowulf's* narrator does not seem to change his stance in the course of the poem, the attitude of Ibn Fadlan changes most evidently. He learns the Northmen's language, starts to wear their clothing, and sharpens his fighting skills, taking pride in being a warrior and in his new ability to withstand pain. During his account of the final battle, he says: "I myself killed three of the wendol, and suffered a spear in the shoulder, which pain was like a plunge into fire; [...] I thought I should collapse, and yet I fought on" (1993: 165). He also accepts the honour code of the Northmen to such an extent that when Rothgar's son offends Buliwyf's memory, Ibn Fadlan immediately draws his sword and challenges the offender to a fight. Most importantly, the narrator-character develops an understanding and admiration for the unflinching bravery, honour, and loyalty of the warriors whom he initially perceived as dirty, brutal, and uncouth.¹⁰ The gradual shortening of the narrator's cultural distance to the world he describes facilitates the narratee's – and by extension – the modern reader's – understanding and acceptance of this world.

To conclude: the present article considers a 1976 popular novel – Michael Crichton's *Eaters of the Dead* – as a retelling of Old English *Beowulf* with which the modern novel is bound by many similarities of characters, settings and events, though obviously differences are even more numerous: apart from the elements of the story world, they also involve the narrator and the narrative techniques. Crichton's novel is analysed from the perspective of the narrative techniques of balancing factuality and fictionality, the employment of the first-person narrator, and of changing the narrative distance. In my view the considered techniques function to recapture for the modern reader the historical and mythical appeal of

¹⁰ It is also for the sake of the modern reader that the character-narrator overhears the advice Buliwyf receives about the fight with the wendol's mother: "You have done the work of a mere man [...] and not a proper hero. A hero does what no man dares to undertake. [...] Then] your name shall be sung glorious in all the halls of the Northlands, forevermore" (Crichton 1993: 138-9).

the original heroic epic in its own historical context, and to recreate the effect of estrangement of the contemporary reader confronted with a temporally and culturally distant world. The novel, by placing the hero's deeds in the context of modern myths, suggests a reinterpretation of the epic from the perspective of our preoccupation with gender and evolution. The gradual shortening of the narrative distance provides the modern reader with a measure of understanding of the exotic world of the Old English *Beowulf*.

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