

Michael Crichton, Ibn Fadlan, Fantasy Cinema: *Beowulf* at the Movies

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Down the years, there have been countless films of ancient and medieval legends, featuring famous heroes and marvellous happenings, but until recently *Beowulf* had not made it to the screen. It has now, however, for recently two *Beowulf* feature films came along at once, *The 13th Warrior*, directed by John McTiernan (Touchstone Pictures, 1999), with Antonio Banderas (98 mins), and *Beowulf*, directed by Graham Baker (Capitol Films, 1999), with Christopher Lambert (89 mins). *Beowulf* has come to the movies. There has also been an animated version for television,¹ and *Beowulf* has even been appropriated in an episode of *Star Trek Voyager*, in which the Grendel story forms the basis of an unlikely but amusing “holodeck” adventure; and *Beowulf* recently popped up as a character in several episodes of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (along with Brunnhilda, Wiglaf, the monster Grindl and assorted others).²

As it relates to myth and heroism, in one sense *Beowulf* has always been at the movies. The story of *Beowulf* dramatizes in stark form the archetypal themes of the testing of the hero and the struggle of the hero against a monster, themes that have provided and continue to provide staple elements of popular cinema. The details of some scenes in *Beowulf* are strikingly paralleled in Hollywood productions, the result, presumably, not of borrowing but of shared underlying patterns (*Predator*, however, is an example that appears to have some specifically *Beowulfian* moments). Thus, in *The Silence of the Lambs* the hero, here a female, ventures alone into the underground lair of a beast which possesses superhuman powers (night vision), and overcomes it in mortal combat; in *Alien* the hero, also female, enters a place of danger and single-handedly destroys a monster of unspeakable evil. And heroic themes are particularly evident, of course, in the classic Western.

More self-consciously, the director George Lucas has stressed that in the *Star Wars* films he was applying ideas from heroic myth. Lucas has been keen to pay homage in particular to the writings on myth of Joseph Campbell, especially Campbell's 1949 volume *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.³ Campbell does not specifically refer to *Beowulf* in that influential book, but some features of his “path of mythological adventure” of the hero are identifiable enough in the Anglo-Saxon poem, and certainly in *Star Wars* the *Beowulfian* themes of terrifying external threat to community, the heroic moment-of-truth battle and the dark and evil enemy were vividly brought to the screen. And audiences loved it.

In the two recent films the relationship to *Beowulf* is more direct, though John McTiernan's *The 13th Warrior* is based not on *Beowulf* itself but on the 1976 novel *Eaters of the Dead* by best-selling author Michael Crichton (*The Andromeda Strain*, *Jurassic Park*, etc., etc.).⁴ The novel is a retelling of *Beowulf* which focuses on the Grendel and Grendel's mother part of the poem, the part dealing with the hero's exploits in Denmark, but it also incorporates into this narrative, in a reconstructed manner, key elements of the second part of the story--the death and funeral of the hero, and the dragon. At least, people in the novel believe in the existence of a fire-dragon. This dragon turns out, however, in accordance with Crichton's rationalist approach, which seeks always to “explain” the marvellous in logical terms, not to be a dragon at all.

Eaters of the Dead is what blurb-writers would call a rattling good yarn. It is a tightly written work by an expert storyteller and also a very clever piece of writing. The novel purports to be the continuation of the tenth-century historical account of the travels among the Rus of the Arabic ambassador Ibn Fadlan, an account known to

scholars as a valuable source of information about the life and customs of the Vikings.⁵ The subtitle of the novel is *The Manuscript of Ibn Fadlan, Relating His Experiences with the Northmen in A.D. 922*. Crichton's fictional narrative is interwoven with passages from the medieval document, particularly in the opening chapters, and the factual register of that document is convincingly imitated throughout. *Eaters of the Dead* tells a gruesome story, full of spurting blood and heads sliced off in battle, but the reader is led into this story by a narrator who is portrayed as wishing always to report events with propriety. The narrator is a fastidious-minded but also fascinated observer of (and then participant in) fierce action in a strange land. His narrative mode is concise and matter-of-fact, with plenty of mention of gore but no lingering on lurid details.

Ibn Fadlan's experiences with the Northmen, in Crichton's version, involve him in being commandeered into joining, as the "thirteenth warrior," the expedition of a Viking leader, Buliwyf, in aid of King Rothgar and his people, who are being beleaguered by a seemingly-inhuman cannibalistic tribe, the "wendol." After their long journey to the "far country" of Rothgar, Buliwyf and his warriors arrive at the king's hall (also meeting there, by the way, Rothgar's queen Weilow and his treacherous son Wiglif), where they repel a ferocious night-attack by the wendol; subsequently, they ward off a further assault on Rothgar's stronghold, before braving the water-protected caves of the attackers. In the innermost cave Buliwyf kills the matriarch of the wendol. Though fatally wounded by this "mother-creature," he returns to the stronghold, and in the hour before the next dawn stands with his men to face a final revenge attack from the wendol, after which the man-eaters disappear into the mist, never to be seen again. The novel concludes with a description of the ship-funeral of Buliwyf and an account of preparations for the narrator's departure to his own people.

The introduction of the mediating figure of Ibn Fadlan, who functions as our educated guide and representative in a world beyond the pale, is a key feature of Crichton's adaptation. We, as readers, can identify with him and can sympathize with his responses as an unheroic outsider on a heroic expedition. He is one of us, and so when he is able to rise to the challenge we appreciate his bravery at a more human level than is possible with respect to Buliwyf, say, who remains remote, inscrutable and heroic in the novel--as he does also in the film.

One of the interesting things about *Eaters of the Dead* as a western popular novel is its location of the "other" and the "exotic" not in the east but in the north, and its portrayal of an Arab in a central positive role. There are technical reasons for this, of course, and in some ways Crichton's Ibn Fadlan could be said to conform to orientalist stereotypes, but nonetheless he is a figure of sensitivity and rational enlightenment (and, as mentioned below, his portrayal in the film gained the approval of Arab Americans). It is the Norse who are presented as part unreconstructed brute and part noble savage.

In presenting Ibn Fadlan's gripping story Crichton mixes fiction with non-fiction, conveying thereby the sense of authenticity that is a hallmark of his writings. Admirers of Germanic culture may take exception to his unflattering picture of a Norse world seemingly populated by drunken thugs, who don't think twice about engaging in sex in public at every opportunity. *Beowulf* isn't like that! But such unedifying details come directly from the "genuine" part of Ibn Fadlan's report, in which the narrator, a member of a superior culture, and a devout Muslim, is constantly appalled at what he sees and hears about. At one point he exclaims that the Norsemen are "the filthiest of God's creatures," adding, in horror, "They have no modesty in defecation and urination, nor do they wash after pollution from orgasm, nor do they wash their hands after eating" (Smyser, p. 94; cf. Crichton, p. 31). In the novel, despite being repelled by their lack of social graces, Ibn Fadlan comes to respect his uncivilized companions.

Crichton adopts for himself the role of editor and scrupulous annotator of Ibn Fadlan's sometimes puzzling account, supplying the paraphernalia of introduction, academic footnotes and other documentation, some of which is

real and some of which is made up. Instead of having a formal ending, for example, the narrative is presented as incomplete, the “editor” adding a note which begins, “The manuscript ends abruptly at this point, the end of a transcribed page” (p. 173). Crichton’s aim in using such devices to frame and present the story is evidently not to engage in some kind of post-modern play with the concept and possibilities of fictionality--though that’s what he ends up doing, rather to his dismay--but to transport the reader into a make-believe world while at the same time making that world seem believable. (It’s a pity he didn’t consult somebody about names, though!) In his Afterward to the novel he writes,

the game that the book plays with its factual bases becomes increasingly complex as it goes along, until the text finally seems quite difficult to evaluate. I have a long-standing interest in verisimilitude, and in the cues which make us take something as real or understand it as fiction. But I finally concluded that in *Eaters of the Dead*, I had played the game too hard. While I was writing, I felt that I was drawing the line between fact and fiction clearly . . . But within a few years, I could no longer be certain which passages were real, and which were made up. (p. 185)⁶

The 13th Warrior simplifies and streamlines the material of the novel, concentrating on the action and ignoring the cleverness of Crichton’s fiction/non-fiction conceit, though there is some first-person voice-over at the very beginning and end, which serves to frame the story effectively. The result of this simplification and streamlining is an action adventure movie with a simple narrative, punctuated by graphically bloody battle-scenes and other images of violence.

In *Eaters of the Dead* Crichton makes an arresting suggestion concerning the identity of the “wendol,” which the film also follows up, though less pointedly. In his quest to “explain” the story of *Beowulf*, to provide a believable basis for it in reality, Crichton comes up with the fanciful idea that the fearsome attackers were a group of remnant Neanderthals, which had somehow managed to survive alongside *homo sapiens* down the millennia. He even dedicates the novel to the palaeontologist William Howells, a student of human evolution. Like other literalistic interpretations of *Beowulf*⁷ this approach offers a way of rationalizing that which is unknown and psychologically disturbing, but it does so at the cost of transforming the source of poem’s powerful sense of evil into just another dangerous obstacle which humankind can overcome in the conquest of nature, ever determined “to boldly go.” The heroes have to confront a dangerous external threat in *Eaters of the Dead*, but not evil. Crichton captures the excitement of *Beowulf* in his de-mystifying adaptation, and his wendol are certainly scary, but there is no psychological depth to the threat they pose. I have written elsewhere that in *Beowulf* Grendel “is an apparently irresistible horror-figure who evades reassuring existential definition.”⁸ Crichton provides that existential definition, thereby accommodating Grendel/wendol to the reassuring structures of rationalist thought.

Something of this definition is still there in *The 13th Warrior*, though it is not insisted upon, and audiences might also interpret the wendol in the film as a primitive and benighted human tribe rather than as Neanderthals. Indeed, with their painted faces and animal skins, they are suspiciously like the relentless Indians in early Westerns, who put the fear of God into pioneers on wagon trains or in stockades, when it’s quiet out there . . . “too darned quiet.” And whereas in the novel the wendol society is structured around the “mother-creature,” in the film they also have a male warrior leader for Buliwuf to kill in the final battle.

Presumably with a view to attracting a regular mainstream audience, a bankable non-Arab actor was chosen for the part of Ibn Fadlan, Antonio Banderas, and the role was made more macho than in the novel: Ibn Fadlan gets a chance to show off his skills as a horseman and swordsman and is fierce in battle; he even rescues a child from the wendol at one point. Banderas, with his swarthy good looks and pronounced Spanish accent, brings with him an

element of the exotic, thereby perhaps introducing some of the routine orientalism that Crichton's novel largely avoids (Omar Shariff is also wheeled on in a cameo role). *The 13th Warrior* was liked by Arab Americans, however, because of the positive role Ibn Fadlan plays. And although the Northmen are rough and ready in the film, with much manly laughter, they are presented as less barbaric and less grimy than in Ibn Fadlan's written account. Our hero does not object when a pretty female takes a fancy to him in the film, and leads him off to the barn. In the novel he says that though he did not remain celibate among the Norse the women were so "energetic" and "of such odor" that "I accounted the whole business more pain than pleasure" (p. 102). The Vikings are likeable in the film, as is our wide-eyed hero.

The 13th Warrior is an entertaining action-movie, provided you don't mind the carnage. *Beowulf* it isn't, but it is well made, with muted colors and an atmospheric use of the perpetual mixture of mist, darkness, and rain, and the action proceeds in a manner that is both suspenseful and pacy. There are some vivid images of the seafaring life of the Vikings and of their customs, and the *enge anpaðas* and *uncuð gelad* are appropriately forbidding. And for Anglo-Saxonists the film is of interest not least for the sheer amount of intertextuality going on in it.

Completely different in approach is Graham Baker's film *Beowulf*. Unlike *The 13th Warrior*, *Beowulf* does treat Grendel and his mother as horror-creatures of intense evil, which the hero has to face and kill. There is an interesting film trying to get out in *Beowulf*, but unfortunately the producers have done a good job in preventing it from doing so, going for the lowest common denominator in audience appeal. The film is one of fantasy-horror, with some gratuitous sex thrown in for good measure and a romantic interest involving Beowulf and the Freawaru character. The result is a half-baked blood-fest (if I may put it that way), lacking in wit, and not even scary.

Beowulf is set in a gothic fortress outpost in some kind of post-apocalyptic fantasy world, part medieval, part futuristic. The outpost has been inhabited for some years by Hrothgar and his household, notably his spirited daughter Kyra and the discontented warrior Roland. But it has become haunted by its previous occupant, a malign supernatural monster, and by her son, the apparently invincible Grendel. Dark deeds have also gone on among the human inhabitants of the stronghold. Into this place rides a lone horseman, the hero Beowulf (after some violent action that establishes his battle credentials), his mission to destroy the evil. He himself is a restless figure with a dark side, and Hrothgar too has been implicated in evil, and indeed Kyra has blood on her hands. In the end Beowulf rides off with Kyra to an uncertain future, his mission having been accomplished. The monsters have been destroyed, but all the other human inhabitants of the fortress are also dead and the stronghold itself has been reduced to rubble.

Described in this way, the plot of *Beowulf* might sound promising--brooding, dark, disturbing. Evil is within as well as without. But the plot is so trivialized by the comic-book manner in which it is treated in the film that there is no possibility of any such promise being fulfilled. The hero Beowulf goes in for kung-fu backwards somersaults and other unlikely acrobatics in his fights against Grendel and Grendel's mother, his heroics accompanied by a brutal heavy-rock soundtrack. Grendel's mother shape-changes from brassily glamorous super-vamp into a funny-looking giant insect with a human head (make-up still intact). Throughout the film the characters solemnly deliver speech-bubble-type pronouncements, like "I am not like other men," "Fear is all I know," and "We all do what we have to do," the script being almost entirely made up of short one-sentence utterances in stilted language. And though the hero evidently has an appointment with destiny in coming to the outpost--"This is the time," "It knows I'm here"--destiny here is only a ponderous narrative cliché.

Unlike in *The 13th Warrior*, there is neither humor nor human interest in the fantasy world of *Beowulf*, and at the end Beowulf and Kyra (both dressed in their usual biker leathers, hers impractically décolleté) seem strangely carefree after the devastation, as they prepare to ride off into the sunset; this is the only time they smile and laugh in

the entire film. Because the film focuses exclusively on the first part of the story of *Beowulf*, there is no tragic conclusion for the hero, who as a romance figure triumphs over all obstacles; and he gets the girl. Beowulf and Kyra travel on to new adventures together. There is no mention of a dragon--I hope that doesn't point to the possibility of a *Beowulf Part II*. Mind you, this *Beowulf* went straight to video: not a good omen for a follow-up.

The more modest *The 13th Warrior* succeeds in capturing a sense of the heroism and excitement of *Beowulf*, and does so in an intelligent and engaging way. Of course, it does not attempt to do justice to the *Beowulf* that readers of *OEN* are likely to be interested in, *Beowulf*, not as a simple story, but the great and profound Anglo-Saxon heroic poem. But the film *is* worth seeing for people interested in *Beowulf*, and indeed could be used productively in *Beowulf* classes, especially along with the novel *Eaters of the Dead*.⁹ The film *Beowulf*, on the other hand, while it may end up achieving some kind of cult status among fantasy buffs, is likely to be of little interest or value to Anglo-Saxonists, nor is there much hope that it will stimulate new cohorts of students to an interest in the poem. But at least Beowulf gets to tear off the arm of Grendel in this one and to set it up as a sign in the hall: *Ðæt wæs tacn sweotol*.

¹ *Beowulf*, directed by Yun Kulakov (S4C/Christmas Films, 1998), produced for S4C, BBC Wales and HBO.

² *Star Trek Voyager*, Season 1, vol. 6, "Heroes and Demons" (Universal, 1995); the *Xena* episodes are series 6 (2001-2002 season), episodes 7-9, "The Rheingold," "The Ring" and "Return of the Valkyrie" (Universal, video/DVD forthcoming).

³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, 1949). On Campbell's influence on Lucas, see Kenneth Von Gunden, *Postmodern Auteurs: Coppola, Lucas, De Palma, Spielberg and Scorsese* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland, 1991), pp. 71-2.

⁴ Michael Crichton, *Eaters of the Dead: The Manuscript of Ibn Fadlan, Relating His Experiences with the Northmen in A.D. 922* (London, 1997 [first publ. New York, 1976], with an Afterword by Crichton, "A Factual Note on *Eaters of the Dead*" [pp. 182-86, 1993]). Crichton's novel was one of two notable fictional adaptations of *Beowulf* in the 1970s, the other being John Gardner's *Grendel* (New York, 1971), which relates the "Grendel story" from Grendel's point of view, as a first-person narrative. For a useful overview of imaginative recreations of *Beowulf*, see Marijane Osborn, "Translations, Versions, Illustrations," in *A Beowulf Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln, NE, 1997), pp. 341-72.

⁵ For an English translation of the part of the account which deals with the Rus, see H. M. Smyser, "Ibn Fadlān's Account of the Rūs with Some Commentary and Some Allusions to *Beowulf*," in *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, ed. Jess B. Bessinger and Robert P. Creed (New York, 1965), pp. 92-119. Discussing the writings of Ibn Fadlan and those of another Arab traveller, Ibn Rustah, Jacqueline Simpson comments, "The accounts of these Muslim writers are tinged with the amused curiosity of men of an advanced civilization confronted with those they regard as barbarians, but on the whole they seem to present a reliable picture of the Scandinavian merchants plying their trade in Russia" (*Everyday Life in the Viking Age* [London, 1967], p. 113).

⁶ The novel itself ends with a surrealistic Appendix, which soberly presents an account of scholarly debate concerning the "mist monsters" of Ibn Fadlan's (fictitious) narrative (pp. 175-9).

⁷ A recent consideration of *Beowulf* by a leading palaeoecologist interprets marvellous elements in the poem as deriving from real happenings which occurred in the aftermath of a global catastrophic event which took place in the 530s: "When it is postulated, as here, that Grendel is part of a bombardment of cometary fragments then everything fits" (Mike Baillie, *Exodus to Arthur: Catastrophic Encounters with Comets* [London, 1999], p. 161).

⁸ Hugh Magennis, *Anglo-Saxon Appetites: Food and Drink and their Consumption in Old English and Related Literature* (Dublin, 1999), p. 83.

⁹ For information on other audio-visual material of interest to Anglo-Saxonists, see "Audio-Visual Resources for Old English," <http://www.hcu.ox.ac.uk/av.htm> (maintained by Stuart Lee).