

English Literature

A History and an Anthology

Volume 1

The Middle Ages through the Eighteenth Century

(A Textbook for the Third Semester B. A. Optional English Literature Course)

Chief Editor

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Professor and Chairman

Department of PG Studies and Research in English

AWU, Vijayapura

Executive Editor

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& Coordinator for P.G. Studies in English

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Editor

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PRASARANGA
AKKAMAHADEVI WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY,
Vijayapura-586105

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When April with its sweet-smelling showers
Has pierced the drought of March to the root,
And bathed every vein (of the plants) in such liquid
By which power the flower is created;
When the West Wind also with its sweet breath,
In every wood and field has breathed life into
The tender new leaves, ...
Then folk long to go on pilgrimages,
And professional pilgrims to seek foreign shores,
To distant shrines, known in various lands;
And specially from every shire's end
Of England to Canterbury they travel

- Opening lines of *Canterbury Tales*

The Beginnings

Literary Historiography

There are traditionally two basic ways of organizing the vast and rather heterogeneous material called literature: one can arrange it by *genre* (that is, by type or kind) or by historical period. The latter approach is called *literary history*. Literary history breaks down the historical flow of literature into distinct periods arranged in chronological order and classifies literature on the basis of the assumption that the literary texts written in a given time span have certain characteristic features, norms, assumptions in common, while they differ in these features, norms, assumptions from works written in another time span.

This approach makes a systematic organization of the material of literature possible and opens fruitful ways of discussing this material. Identifying the common characteristics of a period in literary history, pointing out differences between two periods, or showing how literature evolves from one age to another are all fruitful considerations for the literary historian. Apart from this, literary history is also very useful in the study of individual works of literature. It is a common experience that when we read a text we tend to feel more comfortable if we can place it in literary history. This fact indicates that the historical background provides an important context for understanding literature. The more we are aware of the characteristic beliefs, attitudes, assumptions of a given period, the more we can appreciate a literary text written in that period. In some cases, moreover, it is quite impossible to understand works of literature without some background knowledge of the period in which they were written.

In spite of its general usefulness, however, the historical approach – just as the generic one – has its problems, too. It is questionable, for example, whether one can really establish homogeneous periods in literary history. The fact is that there is quite a bit of overlapping between the characteristic features of different historical periods and that no single work of literature can manifest all the characteristic features associated with a period. Historical periods seem, therefore, to be generalized abstractions, and generalizations always carry the danger of blotting out the uniqueness of individual works of literature.

Periods of English Literature

For convenience of discussion, historians divide the continuity of English literature into segments of time that are called “periods.” The exact number, dates, and names of these periods vary, but the list below conforms to widespread practice.

The Middle Ages (450 A.D. – 1500 AD)

Old English Period	450–1066	Anglo-Saxon Period
Middle English Period	1066–1500	(1350-1450) Age of Chaucer

The Renaissance (1500–1660)

Elizabethan Age	1558–1603	Age of Shakespeare
Puritan Age	1603-1660	Age of Milton

The Neoclassical Period (1660-1785)

The Restoration	1660-1700	Age of Dryden
The Augustan Age	1700-1745	Age of Pope
The Age of Sensibility	1745–1800	Age of Johnson

The Romantic and Victorian Age

Romantic Revival	1785–1832	Age of Wordsworth
The Victorian Period	1832–1901	Age of Tennyson

The Modern Period

Pre World War II	1901-1945	Modernist Phase
Post-war Period	1945-2000	Postmodern Phase

The Historical Background

Before the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, the Celtic tribes (also known as Celtic Britons) lived in what is now England. In the middle of the first century B.C., Roman troops led by Julius Caesar invaded Britain and made the island a trading outpost of the Roman Empire. After 43 A.D., under the Emperor Claudius the island came under Roman political and military domination. Roman conquest meant that Roman civic organization created an urban civilization on the Roman model within the conglomeration of small local Celtic tribal units. Celts became either slaves or unfree cultivators of the land. Then in the early 5th century three Germanic tribes – the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes (later known simply as Anglo-Saxons) – descended on the island in great number from the European continent forcing the Roman garrisons in Britain withdraw and driving the Celts to the hills north and west. The Angles settled in central Britain. This area became known as Angle-Land and, eventually, as England. There emerged from the chaos of embattled Britain similar seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of fairly large territories. They spoke a mutually intelligible language of northeastern region of the Netherlands, which is called "Old English". Thus began the Anglo-Saxon period in English history.

The Anglo-Saxon Period (450–1066)

The Anglo-Saxons were pagan until they were converted to Christianity. The conversion began with the arrival of St. Augustine's famous mission in 597 A.D. from the Pope in Rome to King Ethelbert of Kent. Christianity was a very important force in society; the only truly national entity tying together the different Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Hence, the two most important influences on Old English literature were the Germanic tradition and the Christian religion. Anglo-Saxon literary tradition was deeply rooted in the dark, heroic tales of Germanic mythology, which depict a tragic world in which even the gods ultimately perish. Since Germanic religious beliefs held no promise of an afterlife, the warrior's primary goal was to achieve fame in this life. The coming of Christianity, with its omnipotent God and promise of eternal life, did not so much replace this stark Germanic mythology as coexist with it. In works such as *Beowulf* the poet combines Germanic and Christian elements.

Beowulf is considered the greatest single literary work of Old English and started the interaction of language and literature. It is an epic poem of some 3,000 lines of alliterative verse belonging to the type known as the folk epic. It is a narrative of heroic adventure relating how a young warrior, Beowulf, fought the monster Grendel, which was ravaging the land of King Hrothgar, slew it and its dam (female parent of an animal), and years later met his death while ridding his

own country of an equally destructive foe, a fire-breathing dragon. Thus the chief theme of the poem is the primitive people's struggle against hostile forces of the natural world under a wise and mighty leader. Though the pagan mood is more dominant and the tribal life seems to be the determining factor for the main structure of the story, it has a curious mixing of the Christian colouring as well.

In the late 9th century the Danes conquered most of England. In 878 Alfred the Great, king of Wessex (Southern England) crushed the Danes at the battle of Edington. Afterwards the Danes made a treaty with Alfred. They split England between them. The Danes also agreed to become Christians. Gradually Alfred's descendants conquered the Danish-held areas of England and in time they created a single kingdom of England. During the reign of King Alfred was created the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a collection of annals in prose which recounted the history of England from the time of Caesar's invasion in 55 B.C. until almost a century after the Norman Conquest in 1066 which ended the Anglo-Saxon era.

The Middle English Period (1066–1500)

The Normans (originally 'North Men') crossed the Channel from France, won the Battle of Hastings, and took over the kingdom of England, which legitimately belonged to the family of the new king, William the Conqueror. The Norman Conquest had far reaching consequences for England. It accelerated the development of feudalism in England. Many Normans who came with William were given large tracts of land that had been confiscated from the Anglo-Saxon nobility and they became feudal barons or vassals. In a feudal hierarchy peasants were subject to a landowner, who in turn would be subject to a higher lord and so on, all the way up to the king. In the field of learning, the Catholic Church was dominant, and all arts, sciences and philosophical learning were regarded as servants of Christian theology. Hence medieval architecture expressed itself in Cathedrals, while medieval art expressed itself in the form of religious paintings.

In the early 1200's, England had a trilingual composition. French was the literary and courtly language; Latin was the language of the church and legal documents; English was the language of communication among the common people. During the thirteenth century certain events of history combined to lift the English language from its humble estate as the vernacular of a conquered people and to impel it on its slow climb back to ascendancy as the national tongue. By mid-century a large proportion of the nobility started thinking of themselves not as Norman French but essentially, and politically, as English. The slogan was "England for the English" and the outcome was a linguistic, as well as a political, victory for the English. In 1337-1453, during the Hundred Years' War, French became the language of England's enemy. In 1348-1350, the Black Death plague cut the population of England by almost half, causing serious labor shortages and erosion of feudal system. As a consequence, the importance of the working classes, of artisans and craftsmen who spoke English was greatly enhanced. Hundreds of Latin and French teachers and scholars died during the Black Death. Faced with a lack of academicians versed in French and Latin, many schools resorted to English as a common medium of instruction. By 1385, the practice became general, and even universities and monastic institutions started to conduct their academic courses in English.

As a result of simultaneous use of three different languages, in the centuries after 1066, there were in England a number of literary works written in Norman-French and Latin besides those in English. Originating in France in the 1100s, the romance became the most popular literary genre in medieval England. Many romances describe the adventures of legendary knights and celebrate chivalry and courtly love. With their descriptions of brave knights, lovely maidens,

mysterious castles, and splendid tournaments, romances convey a striking, albeit mostly imaginary, picture of medieval life. Working in both verse and prose, English writers produced romances about Arthur, the legendary Celtic king and his Knights of the Round Table¹. The most highly regarded verse romance in English is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This serio-comic tale of a quest undertaken by King Arthur's finest knight was written in the 1300s by an unidentified poet. The Green Knight is interpreted by some as a representation of the Green Man of folklore and by others as an allusion to Christ. Towards the close of the Middle Ages, Sir Thomas Malory retold an entire cycle of Arthurian legends in *Le Morte d'Arthur* ("The Death of Arthur"), a superb work of English prose. *Le Morte d'Arthur* is one of the first books William Caxton printed. It was the first imaginative work to achieve the wide circulation that the newly invented techniques of printing allowed.

Early English drama developed from brief scenes that monks acted out in churches to illustrate Bible stories. The scenes grew into full-length works called Mystery plays and Miracle plays. Mystery plays² dealt with events in the Bible, and Miracle plays with the lives of saints. Eventually craft and merchant guilds took over presentation of the plays and staged them in town squares. During 1400's Morality Plays first appeared in English drama. Featuring allegorical figures representing good, evil, and other abstract qualities, these plays presented moral lessons. *Everyman* is probably the best known of the morality plays. Out of the Morality plays grew the Interlude³, another form of English dramatic entertainment which is sometimes considered to be the transition between medieval Morality plays and Renaissance dramas.

The voice of the common man is heard in the social satires of the Middle Age. "The Song of the Husbandman"⁴ is an early fourteenth-century complaint about the burdens placed on the agricultural producer, particularly taxation, and the disastrous results. We hear the voice of the English peasant of the time complaining of his miseries under the oppression of bailiff and the burden of taxation to support foreign wars. The poem opens dramatically: 'I hear men on the earth make much lamentation / How he is vexed in his husbandry / Good years and grain are both gone / And no sayings are kept or songs sung'. There are a number of satires specially directed at the clergy. Of these "On the Evil Times of Edward II" is particularly significant. Here the poet describes war and hunger and poverty and the rise in the price of corn and puts the blame chiefly upon the clergy. The extensive expose here of the social evils of the day is unusual, anticipating more effective social criticism in the works of Chaucer.

Age of Chaucer (1350-1450)

The second half of the 14th century marked the deterioration and decline of feudalism in England and the big economic and political changes had their impact upon literature. In this half-century, English literature flourished after three centuries of comparative lull, and the chief writers of the period are John Wycliffe, John Gower, William Langland and above all, Geoffrey Chaucer.

In 1384, John Wycliffe produced his translation of "The Bible" in vernacular English. This challenge to Latin as the language of God was considered a revolutionary act of daring at the time, and the translation was banned by the Church in no uncertain terms. However, it continued to circulate unofficially so did Wycliffe's criticism of the Catholic Church. Wycliffe upheld the Bible as the sole guide for doctrine; his teachings were disseminated by itinerant preachers and are regarded as precursors of the Reformation.

Langland's *Piers Plowman* is an alliterative allegorical⁵ poem recounting a series of dreams, with waking interludes to connect them. The dreams tell of how England might be reformed, and

of truth in justice and behaviour. Langland gives us a worldview, in which the church and man should be as one; but the individual is imperfect, and society always lacking. The poem is allegorical, but does not force a moral, or lead to an ideal solution. Rather it exposes a problem, which could very roughly be summed up as human fallibility in relation to religious idealism, a problem which was to concern writers more and more down the centuries.

There is a remarkable degree of consistency in the way mediaeval literature affirms humanity. With all its faults, humanity emerges as more realistic than heavenly ideals. John Gower uses this human element in *Confessio Amantis* (A Lover's Confession). Gower's 'confession' uses the Christian concept of confession of sins with a degree of irony. Stories are framed within a lover's confession. At the end, when the speaker has confessed all his sins, he announces that he will renounce love – but only because he is old, and nature has overtaken his capacity to love. A farewell to love rather than a vow of chastity is the ironic outcome.

Geoffrey Chaucer began writing his famous *Canterbury Tales*⁶ in the early 1380s, and crucially he chose to write it in English. In the 858 lines of the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, almost 500 different French loanwords occur, and by some estimates, some 20-25% of Chaucer's vocabulary is French in origin. However, the overall sense of his work is very much of a reformed English, a complete, flexible and confident language, more than adequate to produce great literature.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer uses a frame story—a plot structure that involves the telling of one or more stories within another story. The pilgrims' contest and journey narrated in the Prologue and elsewhere, is the frame story. The various tales told by the pilgrims on their journey are set within this frame. It begins with a general prologue that explains the occasion for the narration of the tales and gives description of the pilgrims who narrate the tales and then follow the twenty-four tales that make up the bulk of the book. In the General Prologue Chaucer creates a whole gallery of vivid characters from all walks of life and the tale they tell sheds light on the respective narrator's distinctive personality. The tales are also mutually interdependent as moral of one tale reflects back, commenting on the substance of the previous tale. Thus the total effect of the poem as a whole is a comprehensive picture of the social reality of the poet's day.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the place of women in society was often dictated by biblical texts. According to the Bible, Eve was created from Adam's rib and, having eaten the forbidden fruit, was responsible for man's expulsion from paradise. In medieval art, the responsibility of women for this 'original sin' is often emphasized by giving a female head to the serpent that tempts Eve to disobey God. The story underlined the belief that women were inferior to men, and that they were morally weaker and likely to tempt men into sin. The tale the Wife of Bath⁷ illustrates the view that what women most desire is mastery over their husbands and that only the woman's domination can lead to peace and happiness in a household.

Thus there is a sense of shifting emphasis in *The Canterbury Tales* as older values are questioned and new values affirmed. Throughout the *Tales* there is also a joyful sense of humour, of enjoyment of sensual pleasures, and of popular, earthy fun. Serious and comic intentions go hand in hand, and give a new vision of a fast-developing and richly textured world. Above all, individual self-interest is more important than social, shared interests.

In contrast to Chaucer's fictional world of pilgrims is the pilgrimage account of Margery Kempe, one of Chaucer's contemporaries. Daughter of a mayor, wife of a tax collector, and mother of fourteen children, Margery Kempe became a mystic after a visit to Canterbury and began her

life as a pilgrim. She traveled visited almost all the sacred places in Europe from Jerusalem and Rome to Spain and Germany, made church officials uneasy her claims to mysticism, got arrested and tried for the heresy but was acquitted. Though she, like most women of her time, was illiterate, dictated her autobiography to a scribe so that others might learn from her life. It was then revised by a priest. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the first English-language autobiography, lost for centuries, was rediscovered in 1934.

(Compiled from information located in *Teacher Education: British Literature*, Chen Jia's *English Literary History* Volume I, *Routledge History of English Literature* and Wikipedia)

End Notes

1. The Knights of the Round Table were characters in the legends about King Arthur. They lived in King Arthur's castle, Camelot. They were called the Knights of the *Round Table* because of a special round table in Camelot around which the knights considered trustworthy and equal sat.
2. These plays were known as *mystery plays* because they were performed by trade guilds. In the medieval period *mystery* meant "trade" or "craft".
3. *Interludes* served to provide entertainment in the intervals of a banquet, or other great occasion. Hence they were both short and amusing.
4. A *husbandman* in the medieval England was a free tenant farmer. The meaning of "husband" in this term is "master of house" rather than "married man". It is derived from *hús* meaning 'house' + *bóndi* meaning 'occupier and tiller of the soil'.
5. An *allegory* is a narrative or dramatic work in which almost all the characters, settings, and events represent abstract ideas. The overall purpose of an allegory is to teach a moral lesson. Characters and settings are often given names that clarify the abstract qualities they represent.
6. One way to express religious devotion in the Middle Ages was to undertake a pilgrimage to a sacred site. If English pilgrims were unable to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Rome, or Spain, they could still visit various holy sites in their own country. One of the most important destinations for English pilgrims was Canterbury Cathedral, where in 1170 Archbishop Thomas à Becket had been slain. The pilgrims described in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are journeying to this holy site to seek blessings from the martyred archbishop.

Once friend and chancellor of King Henry II, Thomas à Becket first declined to become archbishop, explaining that in the position he would be forced into opposition to the king. Under pressure from the king, he accepted the position. Differences between the two became so violent that in 1170 knights loyal to Henry II murdered Becket in full view of the people at the evening service in Canterbury Cathedral. The martyrdom of Becket made Canterbury Cathedral a popular destination for pilgrims.

7. The word *wife* in Old English meant a woman and not 'female spouse'. 'Bath' is a city in southwestern England. 'Wife of Bath' means woman of Bath.

Beowulf's Funeral

Original Anglo-Saxon text:

Modern English Translation by Benjamin Slade:

Him ðá gegiredan Géata léode
ád on eorðan unwáclícne
helmum behongen hildebordum
beorhtum byrnum swá hé béna wæs.
álegdon ðá tómiddes maérne péoden
hæleð hío fende hláford léofne.
ongunnon pá on beorge baélfýra maést
wígend weccan. wuduréc ástáh
sweart ofer swioðole swógende lég
wópe bewunden --windblond gelæg--
oð þæt hé ðá bánhús gebrocen hæfde
hát on hreðre. higum unróte
módcære maéndon mondryhtnes cwealm.
swylce giómorgyd Géatisc ánméowle
Bíowulfe brægd bundenheorde
sang sorgcearig. saélðe geneahhe
þæt hío hyre heardagas hearde ondréde
wælfylla worn werudes egesan
hýðo ond hæftnýd. Heofon réce swealg.
geworhton ðá Wedra léode
hlaéo on hóe sé wæs héah ond brád
waéglíðendum wíde gesýne
ond betimbredon on tyn dagum
beadurófes bécn. bronda láfe
wealle beworhton swá hyt weorðlícost
foresnotre men findan mihton.
hí on beorg dydon bég ond siglu
eall swylce hyrsta swylce on horde aéar
níðhéðige men genumen hæfdon.
forléton eorla gestréon eorðan healdan
gold on gréote þaér hit nú gén lifað
eldum swá unnyt swá hyt aéarer wæs.
Pá ymbe hlaéw riodan, hildedéore

Then for him prepared the people of the Geats
a pyre on the earth, not trifling,
hung with helmets, with battle-shields,
with bright byrnies, as he had requested;
they laid then in the midst the famed chieftain,
the lamenting heroes, their beloved lord;
then began on the barrow the greatest bale-fire,
the warriors to kindle; wood-smoke arose,
swarthy over the heat, the roaring flame
woven with weeping --the tumult of winds lay still--
until it the bone-house had broken
hot at heart; despairing in their hearts
they bemoaned their grief, their liege-lord's death;
so too a death-dirge a solitary Geatish woman
wove for Beowulf, cruelly bound,
she sang sorrowful, earnestly of fortune
that she for herself days of harm fiercely dreaded,
of multitude of slaughter-feasts, terror of troops,
rapine and bondage. Heaven swallowed the smoke;
then wrought the Wederas' people
a barrow on the hill, it was high and broad,
for wave-farers widely visible,
and they constructed in ten days
the war-chief's beacon, the leavings of the fire,
with a wall they encircled, as it most worthily
the very wisest men could devise;
they placed in the barrow rings and brooches,
all such trappings, as before from the hoard
hostile men had taken away;
the treasure of heroes they let the earth hold,
gold in the gritty soil, where it now still lives,
as useless to men as it was before.
Then around the mound rode the battle-brave

æþelinga bearn ealra twelfa-
woldon cearge cwíðan kyning maénan,
wordgyd wrecan ond ymb wer sprecan-
eahtodan eorlscipe ond his ellenweorc
duguðum démdon. Swá hit gedéfe bið
þæt mon his winedryhten wordum herge-
ferhðum fréoge þonne hé forð scile
of líchaman laéded weorðan-
swá begnornodon Géata léode
hláfordes hryre, heorðgenéatas:
cwaédon þæt hé waére wyruldcyning
manna mildust ond monðwaérust
léodum líðost ond lofgeornost.

sons of nobles, twelve in all,
they wished to bewail their sorrow, to mourn their king,
to pronounce elegy, and speak about the man;
they praised his heroic deeds and his works of
courage,
exalted his majesty. As it is fitting,
that one his friend and lord honours in words,
cherish in one's spirit, when he must forth
from his body be led;
thus bemoaned the people of the Geats
their lord's fall, his hearth-companions:
they said that he was, of all kings of the world,
the most generous of men, and the most gracious,
the most protective of his people, and the most eager
for honour.

About the Text

The above excerpt forms the concluding part of *Beowulf* by an anonymous poet. The text can be divided into three parts. The first part describes how the Geats build Beowulf's funeral pyre, stacking it high with precious armor and treasures, light the fire and how Beowulf's body burns while his people wail and mourn him. The second part focuses on one Geat woman in particular. She mourns Beowulf's death, singing a lament in which she anticipates the destruction of the Geat nation by invaders. The third section describes how after the pyre burns down, the Geats build a barrow over it. The barrow is an enormous memorial to Beowulf which takes ten days to build, and it can be seen from the sea. The Geats bury jewels, gold, and treasures in the barrow to honor Beowulf. Twelve Geat warriors ride around the tomb singing dirges, honoring Beowulf by describing his heroic deeds.

Glossary

the Geats	: a North Germanic tribe; the people to whom the hero Beowulf belonged.
not trifling	: Not unimportant or trivial
byrnie	: a coat of mail.
barrow	: a large structure made of earth that people used to build over graves in ancient times
bale-fire	: a large open-air fire.
swarthy	: dark-complexioned.
bone-house	: Body; here, body of the king
liege-lord	: a feudal superior or sovereign
death-dirge	: a lament for the dead, especially one forming part of a funeral rite
wove	: past of weave; here make
cruelly bound	: May refer metaphorically to the woman's sorrow over Beowulf's death or to her future captivity at the hands of foreign invaders.
rapine	: the violent seizure of someone's property
Wederas' people	: Wedera is an alternative name of the Geats; Beowulf's people .
wave-farers	: sailors
beacon	: a light or fire on the top of a hill that acts as a warning or signal

hearth-companions	:	servant, attendant
eager for honour	:	The intention of the closing is much debated. The question largely turns on the last word of the poem 'lofgeornost', 'most eager for fame', 'most desirous of honour', 'most eager for reknown'.

Notes and Explanations

- The poem narrates two distinct and, as it were, parallel funeral ceremonies in detail, the burning and the consigning of the ashes to the monumental mound. This can be seen as another instance of combining heathen and Christian elements. The heathen Anglo-Saxons practised both cremation and burial of a corpse in a grave or tomb.
- The vocabulary used is particularly linked to the war (helmets, shields, warriors) and there are a lot of adjectives in all the text that highlight the great pain suffered by the people for the death of the king. These words make it clear that the situation is traumatic for them because they know they don't have many men strong enough to defend them.
- The Geatish woman who sings a song of lament at Beowulf's funeral is assumed to be Hygd, Beowulf's widow. Again the poet neglects to name her, although he does not neglect to tell us the names of the warrior's swords, once more emphasizing the lack of status of women in these times.
- Several critics point out that the final lines of the poem might serve as Beowulf's epitaph: "he was, of all kings of the world, / the most generous of men, and the most gracious, / the most protective of his people, and the most eager for honour". That the closing does not speak of Beowulf's courage or strength or victories in battle is interesting. What it says of Beowulf is that he was kind. He knew decorum. He was good to his people. He was, in short, the exemplar of a civilized king. Some people are bothered by the last words of the poem: "most eager for fame" (*lof-geornost*). They seem to think that "fame" is a superficial goal. We might understand better if we remember that "fame" is really *reputation* for Beowulf. To him, his reputation was everything.

Comprehension

1. What does the hero's death mean to his people?
2. Why did the old woman sing of fear and sorrow to come?
3. Why did they bury the dragon's treasure?
4. What wish of Beowulf's is accomplished when the Geats proclaim his many virtues?
5. Describe Beowulf's funeral.