# 35340 Literatura anglesa medieval i del segle XVI

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Activity: commentary on *Beowulf*, lines 3120-3182 (The following is quoted from Michael Alexander's translation [Penguin, 1973])

Beowulf [3120-51] [3152-82] Beowulf's barrow Then in his wisdom Weoxstan's son her hair bound up, the burden of her fear called out from the company of the king's own thanes that evil days were destined her seven men in all, who excelled among them, - troops cut down, terror of armies, and, himself the eighth warrior, entered in beneath bondage, humiliation. Heaven swallowed the smoke. that unfriendly roof. The front-stepping man Then the Storm-Geat nation constructed for him bore in his hand a blazing torch. a stronghold on the headland, so high and broad When the men perceived a piece of the hoard that seafarers might see it from afar. that remained unguarded, mouldering there The beacon to that battle-reckless man on the floor of the chamber, they did not choose by lot they made in ten days. What remained from the fire who should remove it; undemurring, they cast a wall around, of workmanship as quickly as they could, they carried outside as fine as their wisest men could frame for it. the precious treasures; and they pushed the dragon, They placed in the tomb both the torques and the jewels, the worm, over the cliff, let the waves take him all the magnificence that the men had earlier and the flood engulf the guardian of the treasures. taken from the hoard in hostile mood. The untold profusion of twisted gold They left the earls' wealth in the earth's keeping, was loaded onto a wagon, and the warrior prince the gold in the dirt. It dwells there yet, borne hoary-headed to Hronesness. of no more use to men than in ages before. The Geat race then reared up for him Then the warriors rode around the barrow. a funeral pyre. It was not a petty mound, twelve of them in all, athelings' sons. but shining mail-coats and shields of war They recited a dirge to declare their grief. and helmets hung upon it, as he had desired. spoke of the man, mourned their King. Then the heroes, lamenting, laid out in the middle They praised his manhood and the prowess of his hands, their great chief, their cherished lord. they raised his name; it is right a man On top of the mound the men then kindled should be lavish in honouring his lord and friend, the biggest of funeral-fires. Black wood-smoke should love him in his heart when the leading-forth arose from the blaze, and the roaring of flames from the house of flesh befalls him at last. mingled with weeping. The winds lay still This was the manner of the mourning of the men of the as the heat at the fire's heart consumed the house of bone. And in heavy mood sharers in the feast, at the fall of their lord: they uttered their sorrow at the slaughter of their lord. they said that he was of all the world's kings A woman of the Geats in grief sang out the gentlest of men, and the most gracious,

the lament for his death. Loudly she sang,

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the kindest to his people, the keenest for fame.

As you prepare your commentary, consider the following:

Identify the passage, in relation to the rest of the poem.

Consider its position in the poem's "ring structure", as proposed by Niles (see handout)

Remember what has been explained in class about heroic values. In this passage, find out words, phrases and lines that bear on these ideas. Take note of line numbers.

Similarly with issues of Christianity, the role of women, genre, language and style.

Organize your ideas in a coherent way and write them down, using quotations from the passage where relevant. 30 minuts.

Key ideas for a commentary on *Beowulf*, lines 3120-3182 (quotations are taken from Alexander's modern translation)

## [Identification]

This excerpt is the ending of the epic poem *Beowulf* consisting of the burial of its protagonist, Beowulf, a legendary (fictional) king of the Geats (a Germanic tribe in modern southern Sweden)

Following the "ring structure" of the poem, this fragment corresponds with the burial of Scyld at the beginning.

The king is given a stately (lavish) and noble funeral according to the way this warrior culture wants to remember (memorialize) its hero

## Heroic values expressed in the text:

- 3182, "kindest to his people" and "keenest (= eager) for fame" the very last words in the poem; the chief values in heroic society = loyalty and fame
- 3175 moralization on heroic values
- Funeral: objects indicative of heroic material culture: mail-coats, shield, helmets ← valued by a warrior society. The amount of jewels and weapons give a measure of the importance given to the dead hero

This ending raises the debate about the genre of the poem: from some scholars *Beowulf* is heroic-elegiac poem or 'lay' (narrative poem). The elegiac character can be seen in the insistence on words and phrases expressing lament:

3141 "lamenting" 3146 "weeping" 3149 "uttered their sorrow" 3151 "lament" 3171 "dirge" (= song of mourning or lament) 3177 "mourning"

#### Language and style:

- -3120 "wisdom Weoxstan's"  $\leftarrow$  alliteration preserved in translation. Also in 3136 "hoaryheaded to Hronesness"
- Kenningar: 3133 "guardian of the treasures" = kenning for dragon; 3148 house of bone = kenning for body (see 3176 "house of flesh")
- 3120 Weoxstan's son ← ref to Wyglaf's lineage = formulaic character of language
- 3146 "winds lay still" = personification of winds. Hyperbole; even the winds stop to lament the heroe's death

#### Other issues:

3150 woman of the Geats = one of the few female characters in the poem, one of the six without a name

role of prophetess, foretelling a grim future

- = perhaps because the Geats are without a king  $\rightarrow$  critique of Bewoulf's fight with dragon
- 3168 "of no more use to men than in ages before" = transcience and vanity of worldly and material things