



FIG. 4. *Bēowulf*, l. 529, and others like it.

## Variation and Parataxis

As regards the handling of the sentence, by far the most important rhetorical figure, in fact the very soul of the Old English poetical style, is of course the device of ‘variation,’ which may be studied to perfection in the *Beowulf*. (Klaeber, lxv)

Variation has appeared in both sentences at the beginning of *Beowulf*. What is it? Or better, how is it best represented?

The simplest variation occurs as a single pair of syntactic alternates within a simple sentence, and the simplest examples are in clauses that are minimal in this and in every other respect. The commonest—or most fully formulaic—are those clauses centering on the verb *maðelian* ‘(to) speak (formally).’ The ones that are simplest are also fitted to a single metrical line. For example:

529 *Bēowulf* maþelode    bearn *Ecgþēowes*

One way to understand this type of sentence is represented in the upper part of Fig. 4. There are two simple independent clauses in sequence—side-by-side in the static written representation—without any word or other element to relate them syntactically. That is, there are two sentences in parataxis. The first has subject and predicate expressed. The second has subject alone expressed, the predicate remaining empty. The normal inference is that the second predicate is identical to the first one; it is to be ‘copied’ tacitly. Or in generative terms, there has been ‘deletion under identity’ of the second predicate. In absence of any other information, a next-step inference is that the second subject has a referent identical to the first. The two subjects **Bēowulf** and **bearn Ecgþēowes**, in fact, identify the same person. With the coreferential subjects and the identical predicates (by default of the second), the sentences will be variants of one another: they are different expressions of the same information.

The other way to understand the sentence type is represented in the lower part of the figure. There is only one sentence. But the form is that of a sentence complete in a NP subject and predicate pattern (with no adjuncts) with another NP juxtaposed that cannot be any new syntactic element in this construction. (After it a new sentence begins, typically the onset of direct discourse that the short formulaic sentence has announced.) In this scheme the second NP is a variant of the first: they are different expressions which are coreferential. They are not placed side-by-side, as formal appositives may be. Instead of parataxis of adjacent variants (clauses, in the upper model in the figure), there is non-adjacent occurrence of variants (NPs, in the lower model). More about separation of variants will be noted in the next analysis.

Is one model better than the other? Only if their differences represent real differences in the verbal art embodied in this poem. My sense is that the second model is better. The only explanation I can offer is figurative. The upper model represents two sentences, both short and with identical information; but if the

first one can carry a prosodic pattern of a full sentence, the other is stopped short of its predicate constituent, leaving the NP alone to carry a prosodic sentence contour. The truncation is the more noticeable because the limits of the metrical half-lines match those of the first sentence but intervene before the second is complete.

In the lower model there is no interruption of a sentence (or any other construction carrying a full prosodic contour in speech). Instead, there is a second realization of the subject. *Beowulf* has been named in the first one. In the next expression he is identified in what seems to be a culturally crucial manner—establishing his lineage by naming his father. The second expression of the subject ends the clause and (typically) the indirect discourse, and at the same time is coreferential with the first one. The pragmatics of the sentence will signify a recursion, therefore. Figuratively, **bearn Ecgþēowes** does not lead forward to a deleted predicate, but back through the subject-function already realized, along a path to its complementary constituent, the predicate already realized. The second subject recurs to the full sentence structure already present.

The paths of construction—of construing, rather—which are represented in the models are different. The second pictures an interested activity with recursion and a ready closure, while the first pictures a short repetition with deletion. One is verbal art, the other not far from everyday extempore discourse.

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Listed on the following page are all the formulas in *Beowulf* centering on *maðelian*, cited with graphotactic notation—the measure of spacing between letter-groups in the manuscript.

- 0286 weard<sup>3</sup> maþelode<sup>4</sup> ðær<sup>1</sup> on<sup>2</sup> wicge / sæt<sup>4</sup>
- 0348 wulf<sup>-1</sup>-gār<sup>5</sup> maþelode<sup>5</sup> þ<sup>1</sup> wæs<sup>3</sup> wendla<sup>3</sup> lēod /
- 0360 wulf<sup>-0</sup>-gār<sup>5</sup> maðelode / tō<sup>1</sup> his<sup>3</sup> wine<sup>-3</sup>-drih<sup>2</sup>tne<sup>6</sup>
- 0499 ( )HVN\*UN<sup>-2</sup>-ferð<sup>4</sup> maþelode<sup>5</sup> ecg<sup>-0</sup>-lāfes<sup>4</sup> be/arn<sup>5</sup>
- 0405 bēo<sup>-</sup>/-wulf<sup>2</sup> maðelode<sup>5</sup> on<sup>2</sup> him<sup>3</sup> byrne<sup>4</sup> scān<sup>3</sup>
- 0529 bēo<sup>-1</sup>-wulf<sup>4</sup> maþelode<sup>6</sup> bearn<sup>2</sup> ecg<sup>-1</sup>-þēowes /
- 0631 bēo<sup>-0</sup>-wulf<sup>1</sup> maþelode<sup>5</sup> bearn<sup>3</sup> ecg<sup>-1</sup>-þēowes.<sup>5</sup>
- 0957 bēo<sup>-0</sup>-wulf / ma<sup>1</sup>þe<sup>1</sup>lode<sup>5</sup> bearn<sup>2</sup> ( )ec\*ecg<sup>-2</sup>-þēo<sup>1</sup>wes<sup>5</sup>
- 1383 BĒO<sup>-0</sup>-WULF<sup>6</sup> maþelode<sup>6</sup> bearn<sup>2</sup> ecg<sup>-1</sup>-þēo/wes<sup>4</sup>
- 1473 BĒO<sup>-0</sup>-WULF<sup>5</sup> maþelode<sup>6</sup> bearn<sup>2</sup> ecg<sup>-1</sup>-þēowes /
- 1651 BĒO<sup>-0</sup>-wulf<sup>4</sup> maþelode<sup>7</sup> bearn<sup>4</sup> ecg<sup>-2</sup>-þēowes /
- 1817 Bēo<sup>-?</sup>-wulf<sup>5</sup> maþelode<sup>5</sup> bearn<sup>3</sup> ecg<sup>-2</sup>-þēowes<sup>3</sup>
- 1999 Bīo<sup>-2</sup>-wulf<sup>4</sup> maðelode<sup>4</sup> bearn<sup>4</sup> ecg<sup>-3</sup>-ðīoes /
- 2425 bio<sup>-2</sup>-wulf<sup>3</sup> maþelade<sup>3</sup> bearn / ecg<sup>-2</sup>-ðēowes<sup>5</sup>
- 2510 bēo<sup>-1</sup>-wulf<sup>2</sup> ma/ðelode<sup>5</sup> bēot<sup>-1</sup>-wordu=<sup>3</sup> spræc<sup>3</sup>
- 2724 bīo<sup>-1</sup>-wulf<sup>4</sup> maþelode<sup>5</sup> hē<sup>1</sup> ofer<sup>4</sup> benne / spræc<sup>4</sup>
- 0371 Hrōð<sup>-1</sup>-gār<sup>5</sup> ma<sup>2</sup>þe<sup>1</sup>lode<sup>6</sup> helm<sup>3</sup> scyl<sup>1</sup>dinga /
- 0456 Hrōð<sup>-4</sup>-gār<sup>5</sup> ma<sup>1</sup>þelode<sup>6</sup> helm<sup>3</sup> scyl<sup>2</sup>dinga /
- 1321 Hrōð<sup>-3</sup>-gār<sup>5</sup> maþelode<sup>6</sup> helm<sup>3</sup> scyldinga /
- 0925 Hrōð<sup>-2</sup>-gār<sup>5</sup> ma<sup>1</sup>þe<sup>1</sup>lode<sup>7</sup> hē<sup>0</sup> tō<sup>3</sup> healle<sup>5</sup> gēong /
- 1687 hrōð<sup>-2</sup>-gār<sup>4</sup> maðelo<sup>1</sup>de<sup>6</sup> hylt / scēawode<sup>6</sup>
- 1840 Hrōð<sup>-2</sup>-gār<sup>5</sup> maþelode<sup>6</sup> him<sup>2</sup> on<sup>1</sup> 7<sup>-0</sup>-sware<sup>4</sup>
- 2631 wīg<sup>-3</sup>-lāf / maðe<sup>1</sup>lode<sup>4</sup> word<sup>-3</sup>-rihta<sup>4</sup> fela<sup>3</sup>
- 2862 wīg<sup>-0</sup>-lāf / maðelode<sup>4</sup> wēoh<sup>-0</sup>-stānes<sup>2</sup> sunu<sup>3</sup>
- 3076 wīg<sup>-2</sup>-lāf / maðelode<sup>4</sup> wih<sup>-1</sup>-stānes<sup>4</sup> sunu<sup>4</sup>
- 1215 Wealh<sup>-0</sup>-ðēo<sup>4</sup> maþelode /
- 1215 hēo<sup>3</sup> fore<sup>5</sup> þæm<sup>3</sup> were<sup>1</sup>de<sup>6</sup> spræc<sup>6</sup>