



FIG. 5. *Beowulf*, ll. 344-47.

### Drama in the Handling of Variation (A Request)

Beowulf is a character within a narrative, no more a person than anyone else in the world of words that the poem comprises. Segments of the narrative can conjure nonetheless an imagined reality, as if the characters could be seen and heard. While there is no direct way to represent objects and actions, there is a direct way to convey what is said—by introducing direct discourse. Drama epitomized in speech is at least as old as Socratic dialogue and Greek drama, as new as radio drama, and as durable as the art of storytelling. It has its place in *Beowulf* as well.

When Beowulf has talked his way past the Scylding coastguard and then is confronted by Wulfgar outside Hrothgar's hall, the narrative shifts again to direct discourse. What he proposes is simple: I want to tell Hrothgar my errand here. His sentence is elaborate (Fig. 5): 'I wish to announce to Son of Healfdene, the famous prince, my mission—to thy chieftain—if he will grant that we may come-to-face-with him so good a one.'

Subject and ditransitive verb are first, the core of the sentence, followed immediately by one of the verb's complements, all in the initial complete metrical line. That complement names indirectly the person he would petition, who is designated again in the first half of the next line, and again in the first half of the one after that; Hrothgar's name, though, is not spoken. The variants are distributed so that no two occur side by side within any metrical line (just as in 267–69). The second complement intervenes, in a second halfline. The main clause finishes with the third variant and at the end of a first halfline; that is, when the clause has ended, the metrical pattern is only half fulfilled. The subordinate clause (**gif** ...) picks up there, with embedded noun clause (**þæt** ...) as complement of the verb phrase (**ge-unnan wille**), filling the full verse line that concludes the sentence and ends the speech.

The regular separation of phrasal variants is unlike such classical devices as *schesis onomaton* and *dialyton* which Byrhtferth mentions in his *Manual*. The first is a series of words 'signifying one thing, [which] are gathered together' in sequence. The second is a succession of clauses without conjunctions linking them. In the verbal art of *Beowulf*, phrasal variation (the principal kind) avoids appositional patterns like these.

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0344 wille <sup>2</sup> ic <sup>2</sup> ā<sup>0</sup>-secgan <sup>4</sup> sunu <sup>4</sup> healf-/denes <sup>4</sup>  
 0345 mærum <sup>3</sup> þeod<sup>1</sup>ne <sup>5</sup> mīn <sup>2</sup> æren<sup>2</sup>de. /  
 0346 aldre <sup>5</sup> þinum <sup>4</sup> gif <sup>2</sup> hē <sup>1</sup> ūs <sup>3</sup> ge<sup>-2</sup>-un<sup>1</sup>nan <sup>3</sup> wile /  
 0347 þ <sup>1</sup> wē <sup>4</sup> hine <sup>5</sup> swā <sup>3</sup> gōdne <sup>5</sup> grētan <sup>3</sup> mōton. /

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