



FIG. 3. *Beowulf*, ll. 7b-11

A Metrical-Syntactical Unit

Recognizing form depends on recognizing what is a unit, and then recognizing the relations among its parts simultaneously, or at least inseparably. One kind of unit in Old English poetry is formed by the terms of syntax and meter. It is a stretch of text marked by end of a sentence and end of a metrical line coinciding. (There are other kinds of units, of course—speeches, or narratives of action, for example, formed by the terms of discourse structure.)

After the opening sentence that fills lines 1–3, it is not until the end of line 11 that another integral number of metrical lines is filled with an integral number of sentences. The three sentences filling *Beowulf* 4–11 thus make up one of these metrical-syntactical units of composition.

The first sentence of the unit (Fig. 2) is ‘right-unloading,’ in the sense that after the agent-subject is entered initially with the first predication of the sentence, the more the sentence progresses in predications (independent or dependent) the less it needs—or uses—overt representation of the subject. The second sentence (Fig. 3) is ‘left-unloading’ in the sense that it begins with a double anaphora (represented by the two left-arrows under its pronoun subject **hē** and the adverbial **þæs** referring to Scyld’s having been **fēasceaft funden**). The three predicates of the anaphoric **hē** come along in a balance of two intransitive constructions in reverse symmetry, following a transitive construction; each of the three nonetheless has a complementary phrase, whether nominal or adverbial. In the subordinate clause next, Scyld is shifted from agent **hē** to benefactive **him** (in the parlance of pragmatics), but sustains the thematic unity of the passage. The predicate expands this time only in the two infinitive complements of **sceolde**. The ‘time-from’ and ‘time-to’ complementary relation of the **siððan** and **oð þæt** clauses also binds the two sentences.

The first two sentences in lines 7–11 thus form an ‘inward-leaning’ structure, while both conclude midway in relation to the maximal unit of the meter (a ‘line’). The third sentence **þæt wæs gōd cyning** complements the first two in substance, it complements them metrically, and it does this most effectively for filling only a minimal metrical unit (a halfline). This small unit of text has exemplary form metrically, pragmatically, and syntactically.

0007	hē ² þæs ³ frōfre ⁴ ge ¹ -bād /
0008	weox ² under ³ wolcnum ³ weorð ³ -myndum ³ þāh. /
0009	oð ² þ ³ him ² æg ⁰ -hwylc ⁴ ()þara ³ ymb ² -sitten ¹ dra /
0010	ofer ² hron ² -rāde ⁵ hýran ² scolde ³
0011	gomban / gyl ¹ dan ³ þ ⁰ wæs ² gōd ² cyning. ⁶
