

FIG. 6. *Beowulf*, ll. 350b-55, beginning.

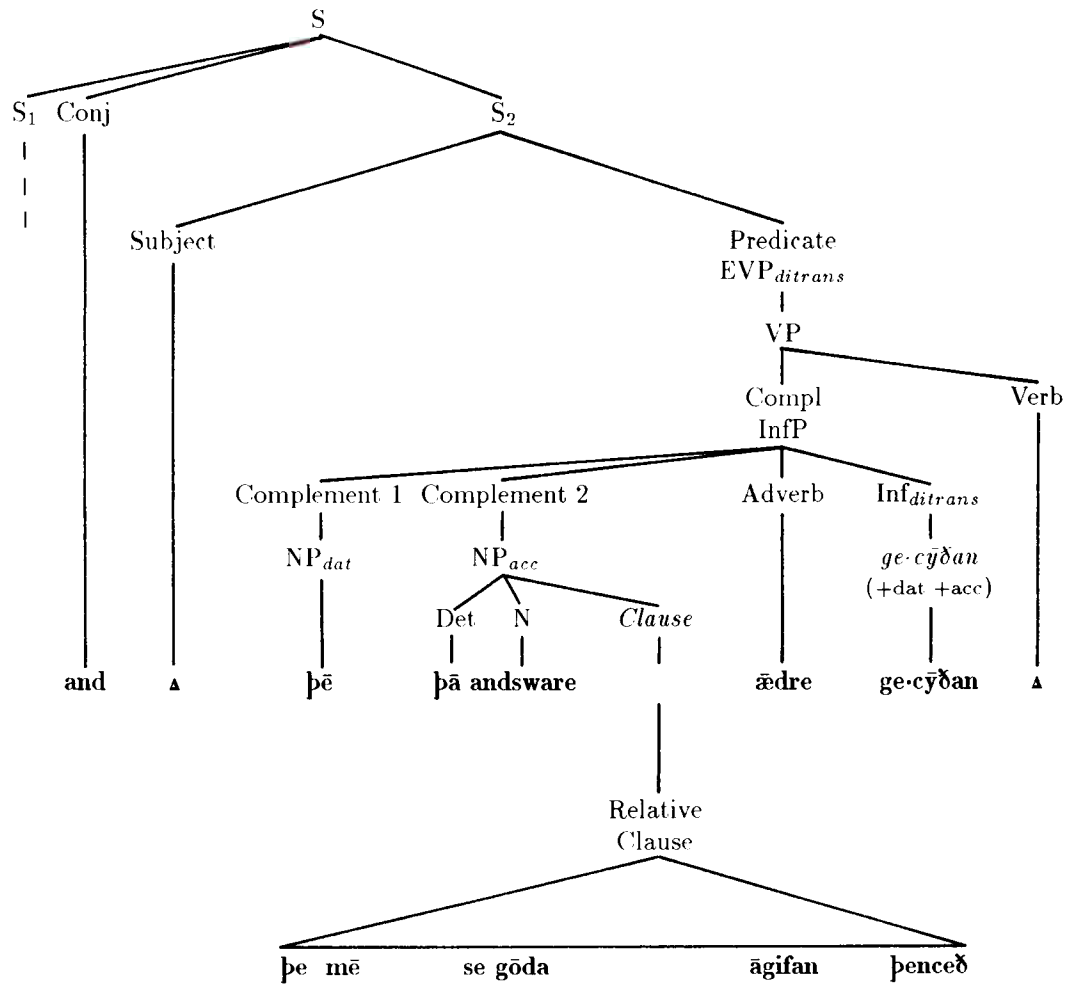


FIG. 6. *Beowulf*, ll. 350b–55, conclusion.

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

Wulfgar's response to Beowulf's request is also simple in substance: I will ask him, and let you know the answer he intends to return. His sentence is another formal speech (Figs. 5-6), even more elaborate than Beowulf's. *Wulfgār mapelode*: 'I will ask the Lord of the Danes, the king of the Scyldings, about that, the giver of rings—as thou art petitioner—the famous prince, concerning your venture, and quickly make know to thee the answer which the good one intends to give back to me.'

Step back for a moment to consider what is entailed in constructing a speech that one-ups the young outsider without being belligerent, while conforming to the metrical scheme and observing the canons of variation.

Beowulf's request filled four verse lines. Wulfgar's response fills five and a half. It answers in part by plainly echoing the form of the petitioner's speech—even giving metrical prominence to **þīnne** (353*b*) corresponding to Beowulf's **mīn** (345*b*)—and at the same time embellishing the form.

The core of the sentence again comes first—subject, ditransitive verb and its two complements. An obvious device for embellishing the form is to stack four variants against Beowulf's three in designating his lord (the personal complement of **frīman wille**), still not using Hrothgar's own name. This sentence also keeps more than one variant from occurring within a metrical line. And that in turn leaves a halfline every time to be filled with other matter. The only way to trim the sentence is to put the first variant in a *b*-verse (second halfline). The other complement, the substance of the inquiry, then has two variants (**þæs** and **ymb þīnne sīð**), leaving one other halfline to be filled by a short clause of courtesy (**swā þū bēna eart**). The rest of the sentence (Fig. 6) is simple follow-up ('... and I'll let you know the answer'), plain as can be without a single variation.

The encounter of Beowulf and Wulfgar is expressed entirely in dialogue, its drama depending in large measure on the handling of phrasal variation. In Wulfgar's one speech preceding this one and in his other two that follow—in which he conveys Beowulf's **petition** to Hrothgar and Hrothgar's **response** to Beowulf—there is no phrasal variation at all.

---

0350	ic <sup>2</sup> þæs <sup>3</sup> wine <sup>5</sup> deniga <sup>4</sup>
0351	frēan / scil <sup>2</sup> dinga <sup>5</sup> frīman <sup>3</sup> wille <sup>6</sup>
0352	bēaga <sup>4</sup> bryt/tan. <sup>4</sup> swā <sup>3</sup> þū <sup>2</sup> be <sup>1</sup> na <sup>5</sup> eart <sup>6</sup>
0353	þeo <sup>2</sup> den <sup>2</sup> mæ <sup>2</sup> r/ne <sup>6</sup> ymb <sup>4</sup> þīn <sup>1</sup> ne <sup>6</sup> sīð. <sup>5</sup>
0354	7 <sup>0</sup> þē <sup>3</sup> þā <sup>4</sup> 7 <sup>-0</sup> -sware / ædre <sup>5</sup> ge <sup>-2</sup> -cȳðan <sup>4</sup>
0355	ðe <sup>0</sup> mē <sup>3</sup> se <sup>1</sup> goda <sup>4</sup> ā <sup>-0</sup> -gifan / þen <sup>1</sup> ceð. <sup>7</sup>

---

Such handling of variation as appears in Beowulf's request and Wulfgar's response is hard to match. There is fine technical skill in a double set of variations early in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, for example, though it is hard to find much literary force in it.

