



FIG. 8. *Beowulf*, ll. 636b-38.

Chiasmus and Suspension

The sentence represented in Fig. 8 begins simply. The initial clause has subject, two-part verb, object in that order (SVO), each constituent being brief, and there are no other constituents. **Oððe** ‘or’ links the first clause to the second, which consists of object and the non-finite half of a two-part verb, with a locative phrase intervening. Lacking are subject and the finite half of the verb phrase, which is a common occurrence when ‘deletion under identity’ cancels items that would otherwise be repeated. These clausal structures thus present two instances of chiasmus: Verb–Object and Object–Verb, on the one hand, nonfinite–finite verb forms and (finite)–nonfinite, on the other. The patterns of chiasmus employ selections from normal syntactic structures.

Further, the two parts of the Verb Phrase are contiguous in the first, split in the second. This splitting produces a suspension, in that the infinitive which **sceal** requires to complete a predication is delayed until other information has been expressed. This, of course, is a routine suspension which the syntax of Old English regularly employs. Within it, though, occurs another suspension which is anything but routine. It is not normal to reverse a possessive pronoun and the noun it specifies—**mīnne endedæg** does not normally turn around to appear as **endedæg mīnne** in the rigid NP structure of Old English. And while they may be split apart in normal order by adjectives and numerals, reversing them and also splitting them with a separate sentence-part must have entailed prominent prosodic markers. Tracing syntactic relations ‘downward’ and ‘forward’ proceeds at normal speed. Tracing ‘upward’ and ‘back,’ i.e., following syntactic connections back through their hierarchies to where another ‘downward’ path leads ‘forward’ to the next main constituent—this takes longer: **mīnne** is spoken next to **ge-bīdan**, but they are some way apart structurally; it is both out of order and separate from **endedæg** in speaking, though joined to it in syntactic structure. Prosodically, **mīnne** requires raised prominence, **ge-bīdan** requires delay ‘by suspension.’

This effect of melding meter and syntax, whereby **mīnne** has metrical ictus and alliteration, is one which shows up the hopeless circularity in theories of Old English meter which take as axiomatic a difference in stressability of various ‘parts of speech’ or ‘word categories.’¹

0636	ic ⁰ ge- ³ frem/man ³ sceal ⁵	
0637	eor ² lic ³ ellen ⁴ oððe ³ ende- ³ dæg ⁴	
0638	on / þisse ⁴ meodu- ³ healle ⁵ mīnne ² ge- ² bīdan. ⁵	

¹‘Kuhn’s Law’ and the many mutations of it, such as Peter J. Lucas, ‘Some Aspects of the Interaction between Verse Grammar and Metre in Old English Poetry,’ *Studia Neophilologica* 59 (1987), 145–175, and those occurring or referred to in the ANSAXDAT archives.