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-syntactic 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 he and the adverbial þæs referring to Scyld’s having been feæscaft funden). The three predicates of the anaphoric he 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 he 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 secolde. The ‘time-from’ and ‘time-to’ complementary relation of the siddan 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.

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0007 he₂ þæs³ frōfre⁴ ge-¹-bōd /
0008 weox² under³ wolcnum³ weord-²-myndum³ þah. /
0009 oð² þ₃ him⁴ æg-⁹-hwyle⁴ (₁)para⁻³ ymb-²-sitten¹dra /
0010 ofer² hron-²-rāde⁵ hyran² scolde³
0011 gomban / gyl¹dan³ þ⁰ wæs² gōd² cyning, ṭ