

## Skaldic Poetry: A Short Introduction

We're going to begin with a little story. It's about the origin of poetry and it starts with spit. Back in the days of myth, two bands of gods, the Æsir and the Vanir, waged a heavy war. They eventually forged a peace agreement and, in order to seal the pact, they each spat into a huge vat, comparable in size to the great well of Memory which lay at the roots of the World Tree. What happened next was a wonder to all. As the spittle intermingled, the liquid began to move and shape itself into a living being. Óðinn, chief of the Æsir, named the being Quash. It turned out that Quash was the wisest of the wise, but he was restless and went roaming far and wide to quench his thirst for knowledge.

One day, when Quash was journeying in the east, he came across the dwarves Fjalar and Galar. Fjalar invited him to their home and they seemed nice enough, so Quash accepted the invitation. Maybe it was by accident, or intention, or in the heat of an argument that it happened, but the outcome was certain alright: Quash was killed at the hands of Fjalar and Galar. Perhaps Quash was not so wise after all.

Fjalar and Galar acted fast. They drained the blood from Quash's pale corpse, blended it with the sweetest of honey, and then left the mixture to brew in a barrel. The mead they created was so intoxicating that anyone who had even the tiniest sip would utter honey-sweet words and poetry would rush from their mouth like a fierce river. The dwarves put it about that Quash had perished from a rare brain disease; his head had become so full of knowledge that it swelled to an impossible size and exploded.

It happened soon after this that the giant Suttungr arrived at Fjalar and Galar's underground hall. These mischievous dwarves had murdered Suttungr's parents and he had come to claim the intoxicating mead as compensation for the evil deed. When the dwarves refused, he tied them up, rowed them out to sea, and left them on a skerry to drown when the tide became high. Fjalar and Galar didn't much like the thought of drowning and, as the cold waves began to lick their ankles, they called out to Suttungr and begged him to return them to land. He could have the mead, all of it.

Having acquired the precious mead, Suttungr divided it equally into three vats called Cup, Penance and Poetry-stirrer. He stored these vats in his mountain dwelling Clash-rock, under the guardianship of his daughter Gunnlod. Suttungr drank none of the mead himself.

Óðinn caught wind that Suttungr hoarded a mead with magical qualities, a mead that could inspire any man to poetry. He had to get hold of it, using any means necessary. Óðinn was cunning and skilled in the art of seduction. He was also a shape-shifter. But Clash-rock was a mighty fortress and it would take all the god's ingenuity to find a way in. Óðinn bore a thin hole right into the heart of Clash-rock then, taking the form of a snake, he slithered into Gunnlod's private quarters.

The chief of the gods worked his charm on the giantess, who became quite enamored with her reptilian visitor. But Gunnlod was also mindful of her father's will and would not part with the mead on easy terms. Eventually she agreed that Óðinn could take one sip of the

mead for every night he slept with her. On the first night, Óðinn drained Cup with a single gulp. On the second he emptied Penance, and on the third he downed Poetry-stirrer.

When Gunnlod saw that all the mead had been consumed after only three nights she felt cheated. As Óðinn slipped away through the hole, she summoned her father and told him that Óðinn had stolen the mead. Suttungr was fuming. When he saw that Óðinn had turned himself into an eagle and was flying back to the realm of the Æsir, Suttungr changed into the form of a hawk and set off in hot pursuit.

The Æsir saw Óðinn fast approaching on the horizon and quickly made ready for his arrival. They dragged out the same huge vat which had previously held the combined spittle of the Vanir and the Æsir. As Óðinn came overhead, he vomited most of the precious mead into the container. This mead was subsequently given to any man already adept at the craft of poetry. But at the same time, when Óðinn was right on the brink of the courts of the Æsir, Suttungr almost caught him with the jagged claws of his talons, causing Óðinn to eject some of the mead from his anus. This was later given to all those men who were particularly bad at composing verse (but imagined they were good).

### **The mead of Óðinn**

This story is my retelling of the myth of the mead of poetry, adapted from a version related in a thirteenth-century Old Norse treatise on poetics by the powerful chieftain and scholar Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). In the myth, poetry – or poetic inspiration – is understood as a liquid which transitions through various forms of bodily fluid and intoxicating drink during the process of its creation and appropriation: spit, blood, mead, vomit, excrement. We might view spit and blood as ‘raw’ substances that must be processed or ‘cooked’ in order to become useful (mead, vomit, excrement). Poetry is also something split between two spheres, ultimately acquired by the gods (culture, life, the self) from the giants (nature, death, the other).

According to Snorri, Viking poets use the myth of the mead of poetry as their basis for thinking about and describing the act of poetic composition or recitation. The Vikings also had other myths that conceptualise knowledge in general as a form of liquid. In one myth, Óðinn pledges his eye in order to gain a drink from the well of Mímir (a name which some scholars interpret as ‘memory’). In another, Óðinn acquires mead alongside various forms of numinous knowledge (spells and runic charms) when he hangs himself for nine nights on the World Tree in a ritual act of self-mortification. It may be the case that poets also had versions of these myths – or others – in mind when representing poetry in their verse as a form of liquid knowledge. One thing we know for certain is that liquid – especially intoxicating drink – is the dominant image accessed by early Old Norse poets when talking about their art. Here’s an example from a poem called *Arinbjarnarkviða* (‘Poem about Arinbjörn’) attributed to the tenth-century skald (bard) Egill Skallagrímsson:

So the draught of Óðinn  
came raining down  
into each man's  
mouth of hearing.

If skaldic poetry is an intoxicating liquid, emanating from the divine sphere, then this heady brew may seem a little difficult to swallow at first. It is unlikely that this introduction will convert its readers into hardened alcoholics, but I hope it will at least go a little way towards attuning your mouths of hearing to some of the colourful tones and potent flavours found mixed in the mead of Óðinn.

### **What is skaldic poetry?**

Skaldic poetry encompasses particular types of verse composed in Old Norse (medieval Scandinavian) from the early-ninth to late-fourteenth century. It is often characterised by its complex metrical structures, its riddling syntax, and the liberal application of an idiosyncratic form of metaphor known as the kenning. For the most part, skaldic poetry deliberately courts obscurity, reveling in word-play, irony, ambiguity and surreal imagery. It is important to bear in mind, however, that skaldic poetry varies greatly in terms of genre, theme and style, and thus these claims of obscurity and complexity by no means ring true for all poetry classified as skaldic.

Old Norse poetry is generally divided into two categories: eddic and skaldic. The term eddic is applied to a type of poetry in ballad form, taking its subject matter from mythological and legendary narratives. Most of this poetry is preserved in a single manuscript known as the Codex Regius or *Poetic Edda*. There are no named authors; it is likely that some of the poems had a long history of oral development before they were set down on vellum in the thirteenth century. Some scholars theorise about their ritual significance in pre-Christian Norse religion, while others prefer to consider the versions we have preserved as a product of the sophisticated thirteenth-century literary milieu in Iceland, revealing the influence of other medieval European Christian-classical genres and texts. The difference between eddic and skaldic is not a clear-cut matter – some skaldic poetry adopts simpler metrical structures and plainer language which brings it closer to eddic-style poetry – but the division still remains a useful one to modern scholars (even if there is no evidence to suggest that the poetry's medieval audience made any distinction).

Whereas eddic poetry is anonymous and timeless, skaldic verse is attributed to named skalds and tends to be linked to a particular historical context or occasion. A significant aspect of skaldic production was the social dynamic between poet and patron. There certainly was money in poetry for the skald; court poets would receive generous rewards and renown in exchange for their finely crafted panegyrics. Skalds composed encomium in praise of kings, earls and lords. A typical praise poem might cover the patron's battle exploits, feats of bravery and prowess, travel expeditions and their generosity (skalds had a vested interest in this latter quality for obvious reasons). The most elaborate formal structure used for praise poems was the *drápa*, a long poem with a refrain (*stef*). Other types of poetry linked to the panegyric were *erfíkvæði* (funeral poems, composed after the

death of a ruler but covering similar material to praise poetry), geneological poems (outlining a ruler's ancestry and descent from the gods) and ekphrastic poems (describing carved mythological scenes on an object, usually a shield given to the poet by his patron).

On the flipside of the skaldic coin, skalds also concentrated a great deal of their verbal agility and cutting wit in the manufacture of slander verse (*níðvísur*). The rhetoric deployed in this type of verse revolves around the concept of unmanliness (*ergi*) and parodies or inverts the heroic tropes and images we get in conventional praise poetry. According to medieval Scandinavian law codes, the composition of *níðvísur* incurred heavy penalties (that is, if its claims we found to be untrue).

'Love' poetry (*mansǫngr*, 'slave-woman song') was also a locus of social tension. The composition and utterance of such verse would bring shame not only to the female object but also to her male relatives, partly because it harboured the underlying implication that the instigator has known the women in question in a biblical sense, and partly because it suggested she was of a lower social status. Despite this, many *mansǫngvar* do not appear to be overtly crude – though some certainly are – and the tone may even strike us as lyrical. Some scholars have argued that skaldic love verse bears the influence of Troubadour poetry. Indeed, *Orkneyinga saga* contains a passage where the earl Rǫgnvaldr composes love poetry for his patroness at the court of Narbonne. On the other hand, there does appear to be a deep-seated tradition of addressing women in skaldic poetry, so it does not seem necessary to conclude that an interest in the themes of love and lust were stimulated by encounters with poetry from southern France.

The *níðvísur* and *mansǫngvar* we have preserved usually take the form of *lausavísur* ('loose-verses'), occurring as self-contained stanzas in Icelandic sagas. *Lausavísur* are framed within the context of specific occasions. Aside from slander and love, *lausavísur* were composed on a variety of subjects, including aspects of everyday domestic life or particular anecdotes.

In contrast, many of the longest skaldic poems – some reaching over one hundred stanzas – focus on Christian subject matter. This weighty corpus of Christian poetry was composed between the twelfth and fourteenth century, and the topics range from liturgy to saints' lives and the biographies of indigenous Icelandic would-be saints. Some of the poems display a sophisticated understanding of Christian epistemology and classical poetics.

## Preservation

Medieval Iceland formed a hub of Scandinavian literary activity; the great wealth of literature produced there during the medieval period is really quite an astounding achievement for such a sparsely populated island. The extant corpus of skaldic poetry is preserved in prose texts dating from the twelfth to fourteenth century. Some of these texts are only preserved in manuscripts dating to as late as the seventeenth century. This means that early (pre-twelfth century) skaldic poetry experienced a period of oral transmission before it was set down in written form. Given the metrical complexity of skaldic poetry, we can assume that the integrity of pre-twelfth-century verses remained relatively stable through oral transmission, although manuscript evidence attests that they could still be

subject to variation. There are also instances where it is clear that saga authors or scribes did not entirely understand the poetry they were recording on vellum. Another significant issue is authenticity: the traditions surrounding performance contexts and attributions of authorship may have changed and developed during pre-textual transmission (and no doubt texts continued to be transmitted orally even after the introduction of literacy). Furthermore, it has been suggested that certain verses attributed to early poets in the sagas may be 'forgeries', penned by the twelfth/thirteenth century saga authors or communities of authorship.

For the most part, skaldic stanzas are used as quotations within prose texts such as the sagas of the Icelanders, royal histories, works on poetic theory and, in a few cases, legendary sagas and the sagas of Icelandic bishops. Saga prose is known for its terse, laconic style; verse quotations provide a locus for the internal thoughts of characters. They can also operate as an important part of the narrative and contribute heightened literary effects. In the histories of kings, verse operates as an authenticating device. In poetological texts it supports and exemplifies points of style. An important point to note here is that there are very few instances where extended poems appear in manuscripts as a self-contained whole. The modern editions we get of extended poems are often scholarly reconstructions, where stanzas have been excavated from their saga context and placed together to form what we imagine might have been the 'original' poem.

Snorri Sturluson's thirteenth century *ars poetica* – entitled *Snorra Edda*, 'Snorri's Poetics' – is a particularly important text; not only does it preserve a number of skaldic verses and half stanzas, but it also gives us an insight into Old Norse poetic theory and practice. *Snorra Edda* consists of four parts: a prologue, which sets Old Norse mythology (and skaldic diction) within a euhemeristic framework; *Gylfaginning* ('the tricking of Gylfi'), a systematised version of Old Norse mythology presented within a frame narrative; *Skáldskaparmál* ('poetic diction'), which lists and provides examples of the kennings and other specialised poetic terms used by the chief poets of skaldic tradition, interspersed with mythological narratives used to explain the origins of some of the kenning patterns; and *Háttatal* ('metrical list'), a long poem (in praise of earl Skúli and king Hákon Hákonarson) demonstrating the application of different indigenous poetic metres and explaining them with a didactic commentary. The value of Snorri's work to modern scholars cannot be overstated, but many recent critics have begun to question whether Snorri's systematisation of Old Norse mythology and classification of poetic language is really reflective of pre-Christian Scandinavian belief and the practice of early skaldic poets. Snorri is rather like the Freud of skaldic studies: although the authority of his system has been challenged by many, we still rely on it almost unconsciously because it is so deeply entrenched in the way we think about skaldic language (especially kennings) that it has become, to a certain extent, self-fulfilling.

## Metre

The vast majority of skaldic stanzas are composed in a metre known as *dróttkvætt* (literally 'court metre'). I think it's no exaggeration to say that *dróttkvætt* makes the Shakespearean sonnet or terza rima look like child's play. The strict metrical demands require its craftsman to possess high levels of linguistic dexterity, conceptual ingenuity and acoustic sensitivity. A

large vocabulary wouldn't go amiss either. Here's an example of a *dróttkvætt* verse, attributed to Egill Skallagrímsson:

Títt erum verð at vátta,  
vætti ber ek at ek hætta  
þung til þessar gongu,  
þinn, kinnalá minni.  
Margr velr gestr þar er gistir,  
gjöld, finnumsk vér sjalðan,  
Ármóði liggr, œðri,  
qlðra dregg í skeggi.<sup>1</sup>

Eager am I the meal to acknowledge,  
witness I bear that I dared  
heavy make this journey,  
your, cheek-surge my.  
Many pays a guest, there stays,  
payment, we meet seldom,  
in Ármóðr lies, dearer,  
of ale dregs in beard.

I'm eager to acknowledge your meal with my cheek-surge [VOMIT]. I bear heavy witness in venturing to come here. Many a guest pays a dearer price where they stay; we seldom meet. The dregs of ale lie in Ármóðr's beard.

The parallel translation I have given here reflects the syntactical arrangement of the Old Norse. It doesn't make much sense in English, but I have included it to give you an impression of how the accumulation of image and meaning may have been experienced by a medieval Icelandic audience. The prose translations provided for each skaldic quotation give the 'solution' to the kennings in SMALL CAPITALS (see *The basic kenning structure* below) and explanations of mythological names are given between the symbols '<' and '>'.

As you can see, the standard *dróttkvætt* verse has eight lines. These break down into two four-line half stanzas known as *helmingar*. Each line consists of six syllables, three of which are stressed.

Each line pair has three alliterative staves; I've given these in **bold** in Egill's verse. All vowels alliterate with each other and we can see this in the final couplet where we have: á – æ – ǫ. The even lines have one alliterative stave (known as the *hofuðstafr*, 'head-stave') while the odd lines feature two.

There are two rhyming syllables in every line – underlined in the verse above – where the second rhyme always falls on the last stressed syllable. Odd lines have half-rhyme, i.e. the vowel can differ but the consonant cluster should be the same (ít – átt, ung – ǫng). Even lines have full rhyme.

The speech rhythms of Old Norse (and modern Icelandic) always stress the first syllable of a word and, given the *dróttkvætt's* syllabic frugality, it is predominantly trochaic. Its rhythms are terse and fierce, perfect for describing battle scenes or making cutting remarks about one of your rivals. But it is also adaptable enough to take on a more sonorous, reflective quality.

The Scottish poet Ian Crockatt has written some wonderful *dróttkvætt* verses in English and a sample can be found here:

---

<sup>1</sup> *Egils saga*, ch. 73 (ed. Bjarni Einarsson, p. 147)

<http://www.koopress.co.uk/Crockatt,%20Ian.htm>

Because Old Norse is an inflected language (i.e. words have different endings according to their case, number and gender), skaldic poets enjoyed a great deal of syntactic freedom. The word order we can use in English is rather more limited as our understanding of the relationships between different words is dependent on their placement in a sentence. But in either context, the pressures of rhyme, alliteration and syllabic quantity can result in some quite unexpected images.

Skaldic poetry features many other metrical forms which are mostly related to or derived from standard *dróttkvætt*. Some skaldic verse is more akin to the ballad forms of eddic poetry where alliteration is still key but there is no internal rhyme. Skaldic poetry differs in that it has a stricter approach to syllabic quantity. A common (eddic-style) skaldic form is *kviðuháttir* ('ballad-metre'), where line pairs contain two alliterative staves, odd lines have three syllables, and even lines have four. For example, the following verse from *Hákonarkviða* (poem about Hákon) by the thirteenth-century poet Sturla Þórðarson is in *kviðuháttir*:

Þar baugsegl	There shield-ring-sails
í brimis vindi	in the sword's wind
branda byrr	swords' breeze
blása knátti,	blow could,
en hrælögr	and the corpse-sea
af hjarar borðum	from the sword's planks
geigurligr	terrifying
glymjandi fell. <sup>2</sup>	resounding fell.

There the breeze of swords [BATTLE] blew the shield-ring-sails [SHIELDS] in the wind of the sword [BATTLE], and the awful corpse-sea [BLOOD] fell crashing from the planks of swords [SHIELDS].

It is interesting to note that verse composed in *kviðuháttir* tends to display a higher frequency of sustained metaphorical continuity than *dróttkvætt* poetry. In the verse above, Sturla extends the idea of a ship at sea throughout the stanza, using it as a metaphor for the action of battle. In *dróttkvætt* the governing aesthetic tends to be one of mixed metaphor and conceptual dissonance, developing some very surreal pictures. There are of course numerous exceptions in both metres but it is tempting to speculate that the metrical demands of the *dróttkvætt* may be in part responsible for the bizarre imagery that characterises the skaldic aesthetic.

### Skaldic Diction

One of the most intriguing aspects of skaldic poetry is a linguistic device known as the kenning. Anyone familiar with Old English poetry will have come across this phenomenon,

---

<sup>2</sup> Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonarkviða* 19 (ed. Kari Ellen Gade, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II*, p. 66)

but the frequency, complexity and variability applied to the kenning in skaldic poetry vastly outweighs that of its Anglo-Saxon counterpart. Kennings are riddle-like circumlocutions where the object or person they refer to is not named directly, but must be inferred through a knowledge of the conventions of kenning patterns and an understanding of the way concepts relate to each other. They are grounded in sets of fundamental oppositions and equivalences, providing an insight into the way skaldic poets and their audiences understood themselves and the world around them.

The aesthetics of some of the more ‘kenning-heavy’ examples of skaldic verse can seem overly ornate, artificial, and conservative in a way that is completely antithetical to the lyrical sensibilities of post-Romantic literary tastes. Kennings could also be seen as elitist: you must be ‘initiated’ into their conventions before you can even begin to find most skaldic poetry accessible. This is, after all, a poetry that has its roots in the courts of a hypermasculine warrior society, where skalds would compete for the favour of their patron by crafting the most elaborate of praise poems.

On the other hand, kennings harbour a wonderful capacity for description in a way that multiplies layers of meaning, nurturing a sense of figurative richness. Kennings encourage a blending of like and unlike concepts that can lead to a surreal and disconcerting clash of images. The metaphors we live by in the modern western world predominantly use physical concepts as a means of understanding and expressing abstract ones. In the skaldic corpus, kennings for abstract concepts are extremely rare, and it is perhaps this exchange of concrete concept for concrete concept in skaldic verse which also contributes a great deal to the poetry’s defamiliarising effect.

On a basic semantic level, skaldic poetry says very little. Consider for example the following stanza by Snorri Sturluson:

Yggs dróssar rýfr eisa	Ygg’s girl’s spilt cinder
ǫld móðsefa tjöld,	men wrath-mind’s tent,
glóð stökk í hof Hlakkar	ember flies in the temple of Hlökk
hugtúns firum brún;	thought-field’s to men sharp;
geðveggjar svífr glugga	mind-wall’s drifts window
glæs dynbrími hræs,	shining resounding-fire of the corpse,
hvattr er hyrr at slétta	keen is fire to cut
hjaldrs gnaptarna aldrs. <sup>3</sup>	of battle tall-tower of life.

The cinder of the girl of Ygg <Óðinn> [VALKYRIE > SWORD] splits the tent of the wrath-mind of men [MIND/HEART > BREAST], the sharp ember of Hlökk <valkyrie> [SWORD] strikes men in their temple of the field of thought [MIND/HEART > BREAST]. The resounding fire of the corpse [SWORD] drifts through the shining window of the mind-wall [BREAST], the fire of battle [SWORD] is keen to chop the tall-tower of life [BREAST/HEAD].

If we ‘resolve’ all eight kennings in this verse it becomes apparent that each couplet simply repeats the same idea: ‘the sword pierces the breast’. The kennings contribute a vivid sense

<sup>3</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal* 50 (ed. Anthony Faulkes, p. 23)



of animation, developing a battle-scene intertwined with the image of a building consumed by flames. A powerful dissonance emerges from the interaction between the kennings and their surrounding linguistic environment, where verbs and adjectives variously work with the object the kenning refers to (SWORD), or with the metaphor embedded in the kenning (fire) or neither of these.

### ***The basic kenning structure***

In the verse above, Snorri uses four kennings to refer to SWORD. Each of them relate to the pattern 'flame of battle'. The basic structure of a kenning such as this consists of three elements:

The **referent** – the object being referred to, in this case SWORD.

The **base word** – this operates as the referent's conceptual representative. In this instance 'fire' functions as a metaphor for SWORD: fire and sword both carry the potential to inflict harm. We could also see it as an image based metaphor, when the play of light on a sword, wielded in battle, is visually similar to the flickering of flames. Kennings are not always metaphorical. The conceptual relationship between the base word and referent may be one of metonymy or synecdoche. For example, kennings for WARRIOR where the base word derives from a verb – such as 'feeder of wolves' or 'sharer of gold' – would not be considered metaphorical. But as a general rule, the relationship between the base word and the referent should not be one of synonymy or conceptual equivalence.

The **determinant** – this is usually a noun in the genitive case which delimits (or directs) the referential potential of the base word to the sphere of the referent. The base word 'fire' is used in a number of kenning types for different referents. For example, 'flame of the arm' is a kenning for GOLD and 'fire of the clouds' is a kenning for the SUN. In 'fire of battle', the determinant shows us that this 'fire' is associated with violent confrontation between men, therefore the referent must be SWORD and not GOLD or SUN. You will notice that the other determinants employed by Snorri in his sword kennings differ from battle but all pertain to the sphere of martial combat in some way. 'Corpse' is self-evident, but the determinants used in 'cinder of the girl of Óðinn' and 'ember of Hlökk' require a degree of mythological knowledge. 'Girl of Óðinn' is a valkyrie, a supernatural female who selects the slain in battle under the command of the chief god Óðinn. Similarly, Hlökk is the name of a particular valkyrie.

Some kennings adopt a slightly different structure, where the determinant is prefixed to the base word, forming a compound term such as 'battle-flame [SWORD]' (*gunneldr*). This does not alter the grammatical relationship between the base word and the determinant, which retains a sense of the (implicitly genitival) determinant as possessor of the base word. The determinant works like an adjective (i.e. it *describes* the base word in terms of its frame of reference, in this case battle), but scholars tend to rule out figures where the determinant

actually *is* an adjective from their definitions of ‘proper’ kennings (e.g. ‘dark beer [BLOOD]’ *blakkr bjórr*).

### **Extended kennings**

Kennings can exhibit more complex structures when either the base word or determinant is itself replaced by a kenning. The indigenous term for these extended figures is **reknar kenningar** (‘driven/extended kennings’). For example, Snorri’s sword kenning ‘fire of battle’ (*hyrr hjaldrs*) could be extended by replacing the determinant ‘battle’ with a kenning for BATTLE: ‘fire of the hail-storm of spears [BATTLE > SWORD]’ (*hyrr gráps geira*). The skald’s scope for extending his kennings was potentially only limited by the syllabic capacity of a skaldic half-stanza, though in practice the number of noun components rarely surpasses five or six in the poetry we have preserved.

The cognitive complexity of extended kennings can be difficult yet deeply satisfying. They require us to work through a number of kenning riddles in order to reach the basic, underlying kenning pattern and derive the ultimate solution. *Reknar kenningar* are often quite playful, and it sometimes happens that a skald has included the extended kenning’s solution within the elements of another kenning that makes up its structure. The twelfth-century poet Hallar-Steinn does this in the following kenning for SWORD:

descending reed of the sword-flood [BLOOD > SWORD] (*hnigreysr hjǫrflóðs*)

Hallar-Steinn has used a kenning rather than synonym for BLOOD as his determinant, a blood kenning which features ‘sword’ as an element. The process seems somewhat circular, and we might wonder whether this was intended as a form of linguistic-conceptual joke.

*Reknar kenningar* can foster an internal continuity of imagery. In Hallar-Steinn’s kenning we are encouraged to view the deluge of blood against sword in battle as akin to the onrush of flood-water against reeds. In *Hǫfuðlausn* (‘head-ransom’), Egill Skallagrímsson refers to his poetry as the ‘sea of the mind-shore of Viðrir < Óðinn >’ (*marr munstrandar Viðris*). This is an extension of the common poetry kenning pattern ‘liquid of Óðinn’, a pattern which relates to Óðinn’s acquisition of poetic mead in Old Norse mythology. ‘Sea of Viðrir’ offers an acceptable expression of this pattern in itself. Egill has added the intermediary element ‘mind-shore’ which is arbitrary on a semantic level – we can already gather that the ‘sea of Viðrir’ is poetry – but works to develop an image where the poetry-sea ebbs and flows on the shore of the mind/mouth/breast.

### **Patterns and variation**

As you may have gathered from the discussion so far, kennings have their foundations in basic, conventional kenning patterns. For example, ‘raven-wine’, ‘toast of the wound-starling [EAGLE/RAVEN]’ and ‘ale of the goose of terror [EAGLE/RAVEN]’ are all individual expressions of the underlying kenning pattern ‘drink of the carrion bird’, which signifies BLOOD.

Some further examples:

Referent	Kenning Pattern	Individual manifestations
BATTLE	<i>storm of Óðinn</i>	weather of Hárr ( <i>veðr Hárs</i> ) hail-storm of Yggr ( <i>él Yggs</i> ) wind of Þróttr ( <i>byrr Þröttar</i> )
	<i>storm of swords</i>	storm of brands ( <i>stormr branda</i> ) tempest of the embers of Hlökk <valkyrie> [SWORDS] ( <i>hríð glóða Hlakkar</i> ) hail-storm of the shield-snake [SWORD] ( <i>él skjaldlinns</i> )
SEA	<i>land of the sea-creature</i>	mountains of lobsters ( <i>fjöll hamra</i> ) whale-earth ( <i>hvaljörð</i> ) cool-land of the boar of Viðblindi <giant> [WHALE] ( <i>svalteigr galtar Viðblinda</i> )
	<i>path of ships</i>	ship-bank ( <i>reggstrind</i> ) ground of the boat ( <i>skeið knarrar</i> ) street of the swans of Gautrekr <sea-king> [SHIPS] ( <i>braut svana Gautreks</i> )
GOLD	<i>fire of the sea</i>	pyre-flood ( <i>bálflæðr</i> ) flame of the path of Áti <sea-king> [SEA] ( <i>eldr stéttar Áta</i> ) flame of the whale-house [SEA] ( <i>hyrr hvalranns</i> )
WARRIOR	<i>tree of battle</i>	ash of battle ( <i>askr rimmu</i> ) apple-tree of the mail-coat-meeting [BATTLE] ( <i>apaldr brynþings</i> ) increasing-tree of the storm of the moon of Viðurr <Óðinn> [SHIELD > BATTLE] ( <i>herðimeiðr hríðar mána Viðurs</i> )
	<i>feeder of wolves</i>	wolf-feeder ( <i>ulfgrennir</i> ) destroyer of the hunger of wolves ( <i>eyðir gráðar ulfa</i> ) reddener of the tongue of the herd of wolves ( <i>rjóðr tungu ferðar ulfa</i> )

Kennings cluster around patterns which operate as an intermediary between individual instances of the pattern's linguistic realisation and the kenning's referent. The number of possible referents is potentially without limit: we could create kennings for any object or person using the basic structure of the kenning to express the conceptual oppositions and equivalences that shape our understanding of the world. But skaldic poets did limit themselves, to a certain extent. Skalds created kennings for more than one hundred referents. Yet the vast majority fall into a few important referent groups: man (warrior, lord, king etc.), woman, supernatural beings (gods, goddesses, valkyries), gold, snake, battle, blood, carrion birds, weapons (sword, axe, spear), shield, armour, ship, sea, poetry. We

might view these as the most salient concepts within the skald's socio-historical context, and as a reflection of the most important subject matter dealt with in their poetry.

In case you're wondering about SNAKE: the prevalence of this referent can be explained by the frequency of its usage as a base word in kennings for SWORD and as a determinant in kennings for GOLD. Similarly, gold and sword appear as determinants in kennings for LORD and WARRIOR. This kind of intersection between concepts – the fact that the same sets of concepts recur variously as referents, base words and determinants – is a notable feature of the corpus of skaldic kennings.

Despite the conventional nature of kenning patterns and the limited sets of concepts, skalds achieved variation by adding adjectives, or substituting the determinant or (less often) the base word with another kenning (i.e. *reknar kenningar*, as discussed above). Skalds also had a vast plethora of synonyms at their disposal, many of them specialised poetic terms known as *heiti*. There are *heiti* for general nouns as well as personal names (you can see in the table above that *Próttr*, *Yggr* ('the terrifier') and *Hárr* ('high one') were all names that could be used to refer to Óðinn). Many of these *heiti* are given in versions of *Snorra Edda* in the form of metrical lists known as *pulur*. It is rare for the same combination of *heiti* in a kenning to appear more than once in the skaldic corpus, although this does occasionally happen, particularly with frequent kenning patterns such as 'fire of the sea' [GOLD].

The varying degrees of incongruity between a given *heiti* and the concept it represents in the underlying kenning pattern can lead to some very unusual kennings. Consider, for example, the following figures which all relate to the gold kenning pattern 'fire of the sea':

*eldr vers* ('flame of the sea')

*bál báru* ('flame of the wave')

*fjarðlogi* ('fjord-flame')

*skin dǫkkva* ('shine of the dark')

*kyndill ósa* ('candle of the estuary')

The further down this list you read, the greater the level of incongruity between the base word and/or determinant and the concepts they represent in the underlying pattern. This has a significant impact stylistically. The basic pattern 'fire of the sea' carries an inherent sense of opposition between the base word and the determinant (i.e. between the elements fire and water). The construction *skin dǫkkva* ('shine of the dark') creates a new kind of opposition, developing a contrast between the concepts of light and dark. The base word in *kyndill ósa* ('candle of the estuary') exchanges the elemental force of fire with a domesticated equivalent which, in the context of gold-kenning tradition, creates a sense of unnaturalness.

The above discussion may suggest that the corpus of skaldic kennings is a fixed system based on a static network of conventional patterns. This is perhaps a little misleading; if we

consider the development of kennings over time, it seems apparent that they were subject to a considerable amount of flexibility and change throughout the five-hundred year span of skaldic composition. As we have seen with the pattern ‘fire of the sea’, poets asserted a sense of individuality by stretching the possibilities of synonymic variation, evolving distinctive types of base word and determinant.

The discussion so far has also taken kennings out of their verse context, and this obscures our understanding of the colourful interaction between kennings and their poetic environment. A number of cases can be identified where poets have actively adapted, manipulated and played on conventional patterns to develop vibrant imagery or multiple layers of meaning. Imposing ‘closed’ referent interpretations on kennings – i.e. resolving ‘mead of Óðinn’ to POETRY or ‘hail-storm of Óðinn’ to BATTLE – introduces a certain flatness to the often dynamic quality of the poetry, detracting from our experience of the subtle ambiguities and specific nuances evoked in individual verse contexts. Early practitioners of the skaldic art seem to possess a particularly fluid relationship with poetic language, a relationship which has in part been overlooked due to the overriding influence of Snorri’s *Edda* on modern scholarship’s perception of skaldic poetry.

‘Miscellaneous’ kennings – where the referents are only represented by a few or one extant kenning – are particularly fascinating. They mainly relate to the domestic sphere with the referents including items of clothing, types of food and so on. The kinds of base words and determinants used correspond to those we get in patterns for the larger referent groups. For example, ‘pot-snakes’ is a kenning for SAUSAGES. ‘Pot’ is equivalent to the types of determinant used in kennings for ALCOHOL which follow the pattern ‘sea of the cup/barrel’. And, as I have mentioned, ‘snake’ is a common base word in kennings for SWORD and determinant in kennings for GOLD. Another interesting example is a small group of kennings referring to EYEBROW: ‘projecting peaks of the eyelid’, ‘curving peaks of the forehead’ and ‘enclosing cliffs of the ground of the mask [FACE]’. It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the detailed description of Egill Skallagrímsson’s grotesquely lopsided brow in the Saga of Egill, that all three extant kennings for EYEBROW are attributed to this poet. Egill consistently uses an aspect of the natural world as the base word and another part of the body as the determinant. This mimics the type of structure used in more common kennings for other parts of the human body.

### ***Mythological Kennings***

The language of skaldic poetry is steeped in Old Norse mythology. According to *Snorra Edda*, numerous kenning patterns receive their motivation from mythological narratives. *Skáldskaparmál* (the section on poetic diction) is interspersed with various mythological stories which are used to explain certain kenning patterns employed in the poetry of the chief poets of skaldic tradition. The following kenning patterns are supposedly based on Old Norse myths (Snorri’s explanations are given in the footnotes):

Hair of Sif<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> GOLD. Sif is the wife of the thunder god Þórr. When Þórr discovered that the thriickster god Loki had cut off Sif’s hair, he forced Loki to acquire a new crop of hair for his spouse, forged from gold by two dwarves.

Speech of giants<sup>5</sup>

Ship of dwarves<sup>6</sup>

Many kennings imbued with a mythological resonance or featuring a mythological name draw on overarching structural patterns in Old Norse mythology rather than referencing individual myths. For example, kennings referring to ÞÓRR as the ‘fiend of the giantess’ or ‘terror of giants’ relate to the god’s general trait as a slayer of giants, whereas a figure such as ‘head-breaker of Hrungrnir’ supposedly accesses a particular myth where Þórr kills the giant Hrungrnir.

The myths of a given culture engage in a process of perpetual transformation. It is impossible to say how closely Snorri’s thirteenth-century versions of the myths approximate to those of an early skald composing within a specific socio-historical context. It is also questionable whether some mythological kenning patterns are indeed motivated by certain mythological narratives as Snorri suggests, or whether they are the type that access general associations and structural patterns.

Although kennings are suffused with pagan tradition, skalds continued to use them after Iceland’s conversion to Christianity in 1000 AD. They initially fell out of favour with a number of poets who composed at the courts of Christian kings in the eleventh-century, but became popular again during a skaldic ‘renaissance’ which culminated in the production of *Snorra Edda*. New kenning types such as ‘abater of (holy)wine [BISHOP]’ and ‘guardian of the gospel [HOLY MAN]’ were developed to encompass Christian doctrine. Some religious poets of the fourteenth century eschewed the ‘rules of the *Edda*’, describing kennings as ‘obscure archaisms’ which clouded the truth of God’s Word, while some of their contemporaries packed their verse with complex kennings, even in poetry covering Christian subject matter.

### **Half-Kennings**

Occasionally we come across kennings where either the base word or determinant appears to be missing. For example, two common kenning patterns for WOMAN are ‘goddess/tree of the fire of the arm [GOLD > WOMAN]’ and ‘goddess/tree of the fire of the sea [GOLD > WOMAN]’. In some instances, poets leave out the ‘fire’ base word from the gold kennings, giving ‘goddess/tree of the arm’ and ‘goddess/tree of the sea’. Similarly, we might find cases where women are simply referred to as ‘goddess’, rather than ‘goddess of gold’ or ‘goddess of the necklace’. Such half-kennings, which lack either a determinant or a base word, could be viewed as a kind of shorthand, a part gesturing towards the whole.

It is interesting to think about the development of certain homonymic *heiti* (i.e. specialised poetic terms with more than one distinct meaning) in the light of half-kennings. In skaldic

---

<sup>5</sup> GOLD. Three giant-brothers shared out their inheritance by taking an equal number of mouthfuls from their father’s hoard.

<sup>6</sup> POETRY. Fjalar and Galar used the mead of poetry to buy their transport across the sea from the skerry (see my version of the myth of the mead of poetry at the beginning of this document). If this seems contrived, Snorri offers another explanation for this kenning pattern which is based on the phonic similarity between a term for ship (*lið*) and a term for ale (*lið*). Through this pun, ‘ship of dwarves’ is derived from the poetry kenning pattern ‘drink of dwarves’.

verse, the term *vigg* can mean ‘horse’ or ‘ship’. A common kenning pattern for SHIP is ‘horse of the sea’. Could it be the case that *vigg*, meaning ‘horse’, came to acquire the meaning ‘ship’ through the frequency of the term’s use as a base word in ship kennings, or indeed as a half-kenning for SHIP?

### **Puns**

The indigenous term for word-play is *ofljóst* (‘too-clear’, presumably intended as a joke in itself). If we think kennings aren’t complicated enough, some skalds employed *ofljóst* to obscure their circumlocutions even further. It was mainly used to conceal or play on proper names through the exchange of synonyms. The following kenning attributed to the twelfth-century poet Haukr Valdísarson provides an example:

*Mjǫðr rekka hasls hausa* (‘mead of the men of the hazel-pole of the skull’)

The ‘hazel-pole of the skull’ is a kenning for HAIR. This leaves us with the figure ‘mead of the men of hair’ which makes little sense (though it may inspire a number of speculative interpretations). An Old Norse term for ‘hair’ is *hár*, and this shares a phonic correspondence with the Óðinn name Hárr. If we replace ‘hair’ with Óðinn we have ‘mead of the men of Óðinn’, a figure which fits with the common poetry kenning pattern ‘mead of the gods’. Thus the referent is POETRY.

### **Some skaldic examples...**

1) This verse is attributed to the tenth-century poet Kormákr Ógmundarson. It occurs in *Kormáks saga* as one of a series of stanzas about a woman called Steingerðr. Kormákr catches sight of her across a threshold and instantly becomes so enamored that he recites love verses about her (though not without a hint of irony and sense of foreboding). It is possible that these verses originally formed an extended poem but the saga intersperses them amongst the prose text. This *dróttkvætt* stanza provides a nice illustration of the art of the skaldic interlace (*stælt* in the technical terminology of ON poetics) and the way poets were able to manipulate the possibilities of syntax to enhance or adapt the semantic sense of the poetry.

Brunnu beggja kinna  
björt ljós á mik drósar  
(oss hlægir þat eigi)  
eldhúss of við feldan,  
en til þokla svanna  
ítrvaxins gat k líta  
(þrá muna oss of ævi  
eldask) hjá þreskeldi.<sup>7</sup>

Burned both cheeks  
bright lights into me of the girl  
(it gladdens me not)  
of the fire-house from wood felled,  
and at the ankles of the woman  
beautifully-proportioned I got to look  
(longing will in me never  
grow old) by the threshold.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kormákr Ógmundarson, *Lausavísa 2* (ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, BI 70)

The bright lights of both cheeks [EYES] of the girl burned into me – that doesn't amuse me – from the felled wood of the fire-house [HEARTH], and I got to glimpse the beautifully-shaped ankles of the woman by the threshold. My longing will never grow old.

2) The following verses – in *kviðuhátttr* – are from Sturla Þórðarson's *Hákonarkviða*. Sturla (1214-1284) was the nephew of Snorri Sturluson and, like his uncle, he was an important political player, author and poet. *Hákonarkviða* charts the royal biography of the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson and is thought to have been composed after Hákon's death as a tribute to him. The verses I have given here describe an extravagant feast that took place after Hákon's coronation.

Né allvaldr einu ranni frægðarfólk fleira valði austr né vestr at ölskipan und hreinvers hvítu ræfri.	Never king in one hall renowned men more would choose east or west to the ale-drinking under reindeer-sea white roof.
--	--

Never would a king select a more renowned retinue in one hall for ale-drinking, east or west, under the white roof of the reindeer-sea [LAND > SKY].

Þar gullker geiga knáttu inni full unna greipum, en inndrótt allra stríða heilivágr til hjarta fell.	There gold-cups swing could inside full embrace in grip, and the retinue of all strife healing-wave to the hearts fell.
---	--

There, inside, full gold-cups swung, embraced in their hands, and the healing-wave of all strife [ALE] fell into the hearts of the retinue.

Skaut vínfars vísa mönnum á gómsker gyltu borði, hilmis hirð en hunangsbára í geðknörr glymjandi fell. <sup>8</sup>	Launched of the wine-ship of the ruler men against the gum-skerries gilded board, of the ruler retinue and honey-wave in the mind-ship resounding fell.
--	--

---

<sup>8</sup> Sturla Þórðarson, *Hákonarkviða* 27-29 (ed. Kari Ellen Gade, *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II*, p. 67)



The gilded plank of the wine-ship [DRINKING VESSEL > RIM] was launched against the gum-skerries [TEETH] of the ruler's men. And the honey-wave [MEAD] fell resounding into the mind-boat [BREAST OR MOUTH] of the leader's troop.

3) These verses are part of a twenty-one stanza poem called *Selkolluvísur* ('Verses about Seal-head') by the fourteenth-century poet and lawman Einarr Gilsson. The poem is preserved in a fourteenth-century redaction of the saga of Bishop Guðmundr Arason. Guðmundr was ordained bishop of Hólar in 1203 and died in 1237 after a tumultuous career involving various power struggles with secular chieftains. This redaction of the saga is believed to have been translated from a lost Latin original which was produced for foreign export as part of a programme of propaganda to promote the canonisation of Guðmundr. The campaign for Guðmundr's sanctification was unsuccessful but this is not due to any lack of literary endeavour. *Selkolluvísur* relates one of Guðmundr's miracles, where the bishop exorcises a female fiend (called Seal-head due to her grotesque appearance) who has been plaguing a community with her rampant sexual appetites. While some of his contemporaries rejected the obscurity of the kenning in favour of the aesthetics of *claritas* (plain language), Einarr fully embraces a 'classic' skaldic style in this poem, demonstrating an innovative and lively engagement with kenning tradition. In following stanzas, Selkolla seduces a smith named Dálkr by taking on the appearance of his wife. The encounter causes Dálkr to lose his mind and he becomes gravely ill.

Dálkr réð fyrri fólki,  
furðu tíðr á smíðar,  
ei var auðar bægir  
ólmr, at Lægishólmi;  
kemr í hús, en hamra  
hlýns olli þat kynjum,  
Gríðr til girndar fæðis  
gjósorð um dag ljósan.

Dálkr governed formerly people,  
wonderful famous for smith-work,  
never was wealth's renouncer  
uncivilised, at Lægishólmr;  
comes to the house, yet of hammers  
maple made strange things happen,  
Gríðr to feed lust  
jabbering on a clear day.

Dálkr, famous for his wonderful smith-work, formerly governed the people in Lægishólmr. The renouncer of wealth [GENEROUS MAN] was never uncivilised. The jabbering Gríðr <giantess> comes to his house on a clear day to feed her lust, yet it made strange things happen to the maple of the hammer [MAN/SMITH].

Lagðiz Laufa brigðir  
ljóða hvass með skassi  
brúns, léz beðju sína  
broddspennir þar kenna;  
sótti síðan rétti  
seims Gestilja heima  
æst, svá at ýtir misti  
undfleins þegar greina.

Lay Laufi's drawer  
in poetry eloquent with the hag  
brown, thought wife his  
spike-clasper there recognised;  
followed then straight  
gold's Gestilja home  
rampant, so that thruster lost  
wound-shaft immediately reason.

The drawer of the brown Laufi <legendary sword> [MAN], eloquent in poetry, lay with the hag. The clasper of the spike [MAN] thought he recognised his wife there. Then the rampant Gestilja <giantess> of gold [TROLL WOMAN] pursued him straight home, so that the thruster of the shaft of the wound [SWORD > MAN] immediately lost his sanity.

Sat yfir sjúkum veiti,  
svall móðr, daga alla,  
Þundi þorna, randa,  
Þorgísl, er fekk píslir;  
sprungu á hreyti hringum  
hyrflæðar þeim bæði  
sjónarberg með sorgum,  
Selkolla því olli.<sup>9</sup>

Sat by the sick offerer,  
swelled the heart, all day,  
Þundr of spikes, of shields,  
Þorgísl, when he experienced suffering;  
sprang from the scatterers around  
fire-flood those both  
sight-rocks with sorrow,  
Selkolla it caused.

Þorgísl sat by the sick offerer of shields [MAN] every day. The heart swelled in the Þundr <Óðinn> of spikes [MAN] when he experienced suffering. Both the rocks of sight [EYES] burst out from those scatterers of the fire-flood [GOLD > GENEROUS MEN] through sorrow. Selkolla was the cause of it.

---

<sup>9</sup> Einarr Gillson, *Selkolluvísur* 4-6 (ed. Finnur Jónsson, *Den norsk-islandske Skjaldedigtning*, BII 435)