Riddles and Kennings

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Contents

Match and Pair: Warm-up Exercise 1
Riddles and Kennings 6
Two Poems by Ian Crockatt 7
So What is a Kenning? 8
Making a Kenning Step-by-Step 9
Taking Your Kenning for a Walk 10
Photographs from the Workshop 14
Comments about the Workshop 17
MATCH & PAIR : WARM-UP EXERCISE

Cut up the kennings and their referents into single strips. Divide them into sets according to number of participants. Each group matches up their set. Discuss the results. For example, which kennings are particularly effective and why. More kennings can be found on the Skaldic Editing Project database (http://abdn.ac.uk/skaldic/db.php?table=kenning&view=).

ulfvín — ‘wolf-wine’

hljóðgreipar — ‘sound-grabbers’

jökla akrmurur, — ‘the silverweeds of the field of ice-floes’

hattarstallr — ‘hat-stool’

hel kastar — ‘the death of the wood pile’

malmregn — ‘metal-rain’

grár nagr hræva — ‘the grey bird of corpses’

tún reikar — ‘homefields of the hair-parting’

þjóð mána stiettar — ‘the people of the moon’s path’
mævørum sævar; — ‘the slender arrows of the sea;’

 salr sólborgar — ‘the hall of the sun’s stronghold ’

 harmsfullr hallr hugstrandar ~ ‘sorrowful stone of the thought-shore’

 in mjóva mengrund — ‘the slender necklace-ground

 himintungl heila — ‘heavenly bodies of the brain’

 fjórrónn — ‘life-halls’

 aldið, ótamt vigg Varðúnar, — ‘the old, untamed steed of Varðún <troll-woman>’

 birkihind brums — ‘the bark-stripping hind of the bud ’

 eykr jótuns, — ‘the draught-animal of the giant,’

 hetskum fjanda heims — ‘the malignant enemy of the world ’

 sú sía smiðju galdræ — ‘molten substance of the smithy of spells,’
*fellir lifdvalar* — ‘a slayer of life’s duration’

*haest hugborð* — ‘the highest mind-board’

*þessi hagkennandi hróðrs* — ‘this skilled conveyor of praise’

*Gætir grefs* — ‘the minder of the hoe’

*Atrennir agngalga* — ‘the caster of the bait-gallows’

*timbrfastr nǫkkvi toptar* — ‘the timber-fast boat of the building plot, ’

*vegr jǫtna* — ‘to the path of the giants’

*hjarta lagar* — ‘the heart of the water’

*þorp þrætu* — ‘hamlet of quarrelling’

*tól bragar* — ‘tools of poetry’

*ilvegr* — ‘sole-path’
BLOOD  EARS  FOOT

HEART  FIRE  HEAD

EYES  MOUTH  ORGANS OF SPEECH

HERRINGS  BATTLE  FISH  EAGLE

ANGELS  EARTH  WOMAN  BREASTS

WOLF  GOAT  BULL  DEVIL
INSULTS    DEATH    COURAGE    FARMER

POET    FISHERMAN    HOUSE    ICE

MOUNTAINS    EVIL    HEAD
Riddles & Kennings

Riddles have been around for a very long time in all cultures:

*The Book of Proverbs ... for perceiving the meaning of proverbs and obscure sayings, the sayings of the sages and their riddles...*  
(Proverbs 1:6-7)

Oedipus found that the king of the city (Laius) had been recently killed and that the city was at the mercy of the Sphinx. Oedipus answered the monster’s riddle correctly, defeating it and winning the throne of the dead king and the hand in marriage of the king’s widow, Jocasta.

The Queen of Sheba asked: "What are the seven that issue and nine that enter, the two that offer drink, and the one that drinks?" Solomon answered: "The seven that issue are the seven days of menstrual impurity. The nine that enter are the nine months of pregnancy. The two that offer drink are the beasts, and the child is the one who drinks.

Who wrote this poem? And what is the thing with feathers?

Clue: it’s abstract

.......... is the thing with feathers

.......... is the thing with feathers—  
That perches in the soul—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—  
And sore must be the storm—  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm—

I’ve heard it in the chilliest land—  
And on the strangest Sea—  
Yet, never, in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb—of Me.
TWO POEMS BY IAN CROCKATT
(from SKALD Viking Poems; Koo Press, 2009, 2011)

Consider the assonance, alliteration and atmosphere of these poems. Now try to find a suitable word (sound and meaning) to fill in the gaps.

Drowning

I love you, ....... . I’d give
   my two breasts to hold you.
Sky-rider, when your dream
   lets you down, drown with me
in the vague haar of my hair
   on this blue ......... beneath
you. ......... , do you doubt me?
   Here’s my tear- ......... shadow.

The Unprotected

Now that a thin sleet-smirr
   sogs the .........’s coat, force-
feeds itself through door-slats
   and loose-thatched straw- ......... roofs,
we’re anyone’s; wolves, skalds, elves,
   crossed monks, weirds, berserks, .........
gods bastards all enthral
   us. Child, welcome to .........
SO WHAT IS A KENNING?

Structure

1. referent – the object being referred to but not mentioned
2. base word – this represents/describes the ‘secret’ referent
3. determinant – this is the environment of referent
4. solution/meaning

Example: Category: object

1. sausage
2. snake
3. pot (or ‘of the pot’)
4. solution: pot-snake = sausage

Add a bit of ‘colour’: tasty pot-snake

Think: alliteration & assonance: eye-poppingly tasty pot-snake

Now your turn

moon hunger giraffe igloo
grass memory mother wineglass
snow hope poet spoon
MAKING A KENNING STEP BY STEP

HARE

1. Consider how you or a child or the hare itself might think of HARE.

What’s its most striking feature: What does it do?

eats (everything) proliferates (24/7)

How does it move?

lopes leaps bounds fast flashes

What does it look like?

long-eared bright-eyed bob-tailed (try fresher images)

What is its mythology?

trickster bad omen transformer hunted witch love charm

2. Hare (referent)

find a word(s) to replace ‘hare’ (base word)

add word(s) to describe how it moves (determinant)

and another to show what it looks like (colour)

think about alliteration & assonance

Here are my kennings:

soft-eyed mower of the homeland loping long-eared grass-mower lop-eared grass-cropper of the garden

nose-twitching garden grass-stripper bob-tailed breeder in the fields

curse of the farmer’s food purse pest of the gardener’s lettuce patch bob-tailed breeding-machine

cunning trickster of the starry-eyed heart-hunter white-tailed shape-shifter on the moon’s horizon

fleet-foot charmer of the harmless child

3. Now try your own

(For fantastic ‘hare’ poems, see David Harsent’s sequence ‘Lepus’ in Marriage (Faber and Faber, 2002)
TAKING YOUR肯宁 FOR A WALK

1. Hold up image of HARE. Discuss its attributes (Step by Step). Take your HARE kenning for a walk in a specific location. Flow-write: think about atmosphere, mood & tone of your writing. Is the voice yours, a child’s or the HARE’s? (5-10mins)
2. Hold up image of GNOME. Follow the **Step by Step** to make a GNOME kenning. Now introduce him into your writing. How does he interact with HARE? How does HARE respond to GNOME? Allow yourself to play and go off on tangents... (5-10mins)
3. Hold up MOON and repeat the procedure to make a MOON kenning and incorporate into your writing. Let your imagination run free!
4. Hold up WITCH and repeat the procedure. (5-10mins). Read round and discuss participants’ writing. This (exaggerated) exercise demonstrates how unexpected juxtapositions can lead the writer into new/ unusual/ surreal landscapes and moods.

Immanuel Giel
BREASTS

fjórränn — ‘life-halls’

ance of the smithy of spells,’
COMMENTS ABOUT THE WORKSHOP

Valérie Fabre: *The workshop on Saturday was a great source of new inspiration. I hope we will have a chance to work together again.*

Linda Canalelli: *It was stimulating to be part of the group, despite having no former knowledge of Kennings. Lucy and Debbie put us at ease with the subject but at the same time gave us the stimuli to work with and gain confidence.*

Michael Bardouleau: *Listening to other people’s work and seeing how they’d integrated kennings in subtle and overt ways into their writing was fascinating. There were no dry and dull discussions! I was exhausted when I got home afterwards! Highly recommended.*

Kathryn Crowcroft: *The workshop was just fantastic, thank you. I got so much out of it, and learned a great deal. Such a lovely group of people too.*