

A NOTE ON DRÓTTKVÆTT

DRÓTTKVÆTT, one of the most difficult of metres, is nevertheless the most common form of verse in the Icelandic sagas, and most of the verse contained in *Kormak* is governed by its complex rules.

A stanza of *dróttkvætt*, eight even lines, is made up of two halves of four lines each. Syntactically independent, the halves are strictly separate entities; a sentence begun in the first half is never carried over to the second. Each line consists of six syllables, of which three are stressed and three unstressed.

Lines are linked, two and two, by alliteration, which means that the same sound has to occur three times in each couplet – twice in stressed syllables of the first line, and once in the first stressed syllable of the second. The device, common to all skaldic poetry, indeed to all Icelandic poetry except ballads and modern free verse, accentuates the rhythm and adds to the musical quality of the composition.

Dróttkvætt rhyme is equally intricate. Odd-numbered lines contain internal consonance, or half-rhyme, meaning stressed or semi-stressed syllables in which the vowels differ, while the consonants that follow them are the same (e.g. *hold* : *wield*). Even-numbered lines, on the other hand, must have full syllabic rhyme (e.g. *hand* : *land*). The first component part of each rhyme or consonance can be placed almost anywhere in the line, but the second must always be the penultimate syllable.

As may be gathered from the aforesaid, the constrictions of this metre are formidable. However, the skalds frequently took liberties with *dróttkvætt*. They would substitute two short, or unstressed, syllables for one long; they would sometimes put rhyme instead of consonance in an odd-numbered line; occasionally, they would even be content with a

flawed rhyme or incorrect alliteration. Yet, if we are to believe the sagas, an amazing number of people from all layers of society were capable of 'throwing forth' a flawless stanza in this metre.

To understand such verse-making prowess one must bear in mind that whatever inherent poetic talents a skald possessed were supplemented by a number of favourable circumstances. First, not only his own experience from an early age but that of generations before him had made him especially susceptible to the skills of his particular craft, in much the same way as, for instance, their milieu has made the Swiss expert watchmakers. Second, a definite metre, in spite of its constrictions, may be of considerable assistance to the poet. Modern free-verse writers often accuse their more conservative colleagues of allowing the metre to do the composing for them, and there is some truth in that statement; rhyme and alliteration drastically reduce the number of words to be considered for a given place in the verse.

The medieval Icelandic skald had still other advantages. Modern poets and public alike frown upon the use of inverted or unnatural word order, but the skald was free to put his words in whatever order best fitted the strait jacket of his metre. Most of all, perhaps, he was aided by the audience's acceptance of skaldic diction. Any skald worth his salt retained a large stock of words for use in poetry only - words designating commonplace things, but extremely rare, if not altogether absent, in daily speech. And there were also the *kennings*.

A *kenning* in its simplest form is a composite term used instead of another, plainer one: for instance, wound-bees for arrows, brow-moon for an eye, sea-stallion for a ship. Although certain rules governed the creation of such *kennings*, these were easily understandable to all, and the variety was infinite, especially when the possibilities of composite *kennings* were taken into account. The latter consisted of a simple *kenning* and another term (sometimes a *kenning* in itself), which, taken together, were understood as one. An example of such a composite *kenning* is stones of the hawk-strand, in which hawk-strand by itself is a *kenning* meaning a hand, or an arm (in falconry, the place where the hawk is commonly carried); stones of the hand, consequently, means gems, or jewelry. All that was necessary to understand such a *kenning* was a little poetic

imagination. Other *kennings*, however, were based on myths or legends and presumed a certain degree of erudition on the part of the listener. It is impossible, for instance, to realise that 'Suttung's mead' means poetry without knowing the story that lurks behind the phrase.

A single stanza, the fifth of *Kormáks saga* (text from the 1939 edition of Einar Ól. Sveinsson), serves to illustrate many of the intricacies and pitfalls of *dróttkvætt*. A literal translation is provided alongside. Rhyme is indicated by italics, consonance by small capitals, alliteration by underlining, main stress by a single acute accent, secondary stress by a double acute accent, and unaccented syllables by a curved sign.

Eitt LÝTI kvazk ÁTA
 eldbekks á mér þekkjá
 EIR of aptanskætur
 allhvít, ok þó líít;
 haukmæRAR kvað HÁRI
 Hlín velborin mínu,
 þat skyldak KYN KVINNA
 kenna, sveipt í emi.

In the twilight, the fair Ata
 brook-fire's Eir (lady) said she
 detected one blemish in me - and
 yet a small one;
 the noble hawk-land's Hlín (woman)
 said there was a sweep in my
 hair over my forehead; I should
 know the damsels.

Ata brook-fire's Eir, a composite *kenning*, may be explained as follows:

Ata (genitive of Ati) = proper name of a sea-king;

the sea-king's brook = the sea;

the sea's fire = gold;

gold's Eir (proper name of a goddess) = a lady.

Hawk-land's Hlín is simpler: Hawk-land (cf. 'hawk-strand' above)

= hand, or arm;

hand's Hlín (proper name of a goddess) = woman.

As for the word order, if the words in each half of the stanza were numbered consecutively, and then placed in a reasonable prose order, the numbers would run as follows: first half, 12, 4, 5, 9, 3, 8, 6, 7, 1, 2, 13, 14, 15, 10, 11; second half, 5, 1, 4, 2, 3, 6, 12, 13, 14, 8, 11, 7, 9, 10. Such an order is hardly conducive to easy understanding.

Yet, for all the juggling, if the strictest measure of metrical design were applied, only two lines in the whole stanza (3 and 8) would pass the test. Here, consonance, rhyme, and natural stress are quite flawless. In the rest of the lines the stress is more or less irregular.

In Icelandic the main stress is always on the first syllable of the word. In poetry, however, the usual emphasis is sometimes shifted to a normally unaccented syllable when the metre so demands. Hence, the stress on the final *-i* in *lýti* (line 1), the *-ar* in *haukmærar* (line 5), and the *-bor-* in *velborin* (line 6). In reading, this unnatural stress is modified by a secondary stress on a rhymed (or consonant) syllable – a device that also serves to make the rhyme (or consonance) clearer to the listener. Thus, to make up for the flaw in composition the reader is likely to stress, for example, *lýt-* (line 1) and *-mæ-* (line 5) somewhat more than the design of the metre calls for.

A further irregularity is to be found in the metrical structure of line 7. According to the metre stress should fall on the second syllable of *skyldak*, but none on the word *kyn*. But the alliterative sound cannot be placed in an unaccented syllable, and *kyn*, therefore, must be stressed. (The defect could be easily corrected by moving the word *kyn* to the front of the line; perhaps, it is an error in transcription.) The consonance of the line is not quite flawless either; the single and the double *n* do not sound alike. On the other hand, the *y* and the *i*, which in modern Icelandic are identical in sound, were not so in medieval times. Consequently, the use of these vowels in the consonance is not a fault.

For comparison, the same stanza (text of 1832) and Morris' translation follow:

Eitt lýti kveðst íta
eldbekks á mér þikkja
Eir of aptan skærun
allhvít ok þó lítið;
hauk mærar kvað hári
Hlín velborin mínu
(þat skylda ek kyn kvenna
kenna) sveipat í enni

One flaw in me she findeth,
Fair goddess of the hearth,
Gazing through evenings glimmer,
Nor great is that one blemish:
She saith, the noble sweetling,
That my hair sweeps oer my brow:
Ah, such a maid mid maidens
Well meseems must I know.

The *kennings* in this edition are explained a little differently, but the result is virtually the same.

To modern eyes and ears the combined result of skaldic diction and free word order often proves confusing. Even an Icelander may find difficulty, after such verbal juggling, in putting all the parts of a given stanza in their natural places and in deciphering the poet's meaning. Despite that, there seems to have been no lack of listeners who were imaginative and erudite enough to find pleasure in the skalds' performances. If there were some in the audience who yawned during a recitation, it is clear that the great majority had ears attuned to the skaldic arts. The restrictions of *dróttkvætt* and the chaotic word order must have obscured the meaning of the verse, but frequently the *kennings* more than made up for the faults. They were not only a means of escape for a poet struggling with his metre but often also very beautiful poetic metaphors.