

Stirring the Mead of Poetry: The Poetics of Skaldic Verse

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What makes skaldic poetry “skaldic”?

What skalds wrote = mostly “court poetry” (for rulers)

Margaret Clunies Ross: court poetry is characterized by:

- “riddling allusions to Old Norse myth and heroic legend”
- “complex verse forms” (*dróttkvætt*)
- “fractured syntax” (= scrambled word order)
- “abstruse diction”
 - kennings: “x of y = z” *Example: “fire of the sea” = gold*
 - *heiti*: fancy synonyms *Example: “steed” = horse*

- *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, p. 2

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dróttkvætt: verse form

1. Structure

- Eight lines = one stanza
- Are in two groups of four
 - one group = *helming*
 - each *helming* a complete “syntactic unit”
- Each line has six syllables
 - three stressed
 - three unstressed

Stress: where the accent falls

- Words: stress depends on *spoken pronunciation*
 - re**GARD** vs. **RE**gal
 - **ACC**ess vs. suc**CESS**
 - be**FORE** vs. **A**fter
- Phrases: stress depends on emphasis. *Example: What is this?*
 - **WHAT** is THIS?
 - what **IS** this?

dróttkvætt: verse form

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- Eight lines total, in
- Two groups of four
 - one group = *helming*
 - Each *helming* a complete “syntactic unit”
- **Each line has six syllables**
 - **Three stressed**
 - Three unstressed

Haustlǫng by Þjóðolfr of Hvinir
St. 16, 1st *helming*: syllables and **stresses**

Þyrmðit Baldrs of barmi –

berg – **sólgnum þar dólgi** –

hristusk björg ok brustu –

brann upphiminn – **manna**.

dróttkvætt: verse form

2. Alliteration: repetition of 1) *initial* 2) *sound* of 3) *a syllable*

- must involve **stressed** syllables
- any vowel alliterates with any vowel
- “sh” with “sh” (not “s”)
- “ch” with “ch” (not “s” or “k”)
- voiced “th” with itself (“**th**is” or “**th**at”)
- unvoiced “th” with itself “th” (“**th**in” “**th**ing”)

dróttkvætt: verse form

2. Alliteration: *examples*

- let the games begin
- reading and writing
- ancient evil
- the jolly green giant
- the shining shore of the surging ocean

dróttkvætt: verse form

2. Alliteration: *examples*

- let the Games beGin
- Reading and wRiting
- Ancient Evil
- the Jolly green Giant
- the SHining SHore of the surging ocean

dróttkvætt: verse form

2. Alliteration: pattern in *dróttkvætt*

- must involve **stressed** syllables
- odd lines (1, 3, 5, 7): two stressed syllables must alliterate with each other.
- even lines (2, 4, 6, 8):
 - *first* stressed syllable must alliterate with
 - alliterating syllables of *previous* line

Haustlǫng 16, 1st helming: alliteration

- 1 *Þyrmǫit Baldrs of barmi –*
- 2 *berg – sólgnum þar dólgi –*
- 3 *hristusk bjǫrg ok brustu–*
- 4 *brann upphiminn – manna.*

dróttkvætt: verse form

3. Rhyme

A. Even lines:

- *full* rhyme of
- *two syllables* in line

Haustlǫng 16, 1st helming:
full rhyme in even lines

Þyrmðit Baldrs of barmi –

2 *berg – **sól**gnum þar **dól**gi –*

hristusk bjǫrg ok brustu–

4 ***brann** upphiminn – **man**na.*

dróttkvætt: verse form

3. Rhyme

B. Odd lines: “half-rhyme” of two syllables in line:

- Same final consonant(s); vowel can vary
- *Examples:*
 - **wild** and **bold**
 - the **black tick**
 - the **tick** is **awake**
 - an **evil livelihood**

*Haustlǫng 16, 1st helming:
half-rhyme in odd lines*

- 1 *Þyrmðit Baldrs of barmi –
berg – sólgnum þar dólgi –*
- 3 *hristusk björg ok brustu–
brann upphiminn – manna.*

dróttkvætt: summary

1. Structure

- two groups of four lines each
- six syllables per line (three stressed)

2. Alliteration

- odd: two stresses even: first stress w/ previous line

3. Rhyming syllables

- odd: half-rhyme (*skoðending*) even: full rhyme (*aðalhending*)

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Haustlǫng 16, first helming

*Þyrmðit Baldrs of barmi –
berg – sólgnum þar dólgi –
hristusk björg ok brustu –
brann upphiminn – manna.*

Did not spare Baldr's brother –
mountains – greedy there enemy –
were shaken cliffs and shattered –
burned upper sky – of men.

Baldr's brother (=THOR) did not spare [the] **greedy enemy of men** (=HRUNGNIR) there; mountains were shaken and cliffs shattered; [the] upper sky burned.

Haustlǫng 16, second helming

*Mjök frák móti hrökkva
myrkbeins Haka reinar,
þás vígligan, vagna
vátt, sinn bana þátti.*

Greatly I have heard in response recoiled
of long-bone of Haki of land,
when warlike, of wagons
knower, his slayer perceived.

I have heard [that the] **knower of [the] dark bone of [the] land of Haki's wagons** greatly recoiled in response when he perceived **his warlike slayer**.

An extended kenning

- Haki: a sea-king
- Haki's wagons: **ships**
- The land of Haki's wagons = land of ships = **sea**
- Dark bone of the land of Haki's wagons = dark bone of the sea = **rock**
- Knower of the dark bone of the land of Haki's wagons = knower of rock = **JQTUN**, i.e, Hrungrnir

Haustlǫng 16, second helming

*Mjök frák móti hrökkva
myrkbeins Haka reinar,
þás vígligan, vagna
vátt, sinn bana þátti.*

Greatly I have heard in response recoiled
of long-bone of Haki of land,
when warlike, of wagons
knower, his slayer perceived.

I have heard [that the] **knower of [the] dark bone of [the] land of Haki's wagons** (=HRUNGNIR) greatly recoiled in response when he perceived **his warlike slayer** (=THOR).

Writing “skaldic” poetry in English

- “riddling allusions to Old Norse myth and heroic legend”
- “complex verse forms” (*dróttkvætt*)
- ~~“fractured syntax” (= scrambled word order)~~
- “abstruse diction”
 - kennings: “x of y = z” *Example: “fire of the sea” = gold*
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Writing skaldic verse

Tolkien on Old English verse (“The Monsters and the Critics”):
“the lines [...] are more like masonry than music.”

Terms for skald, from a verse (allegedly) by Bragi:

- *skapsmiðr Viðurs* (“shaping-smith of Viður”)
- *óðs skap-Móði* (“poetry’s shaping-Móði”)
- *hagsmiðr bragar* (“skilled smith of poetry”)

Prayer to Thor against COVID 19

A scathe-worm bides and broods,
brewing noisome poison:
seething, sly, it slithers,
spreading deadly venom;

Wrangler with the ring of
reiver's foaming homefield,
strike against this sickness!
slay this furtive serpent!

Kenning: “reiver's foaming homefield” = sea
 “ring of the sea” = the Midgard Serpent
 “wrangler with the Midgard Serpent” = **THOR**

dróttkvætt: summary

1. Structure

- **two *helmings* of four lines each**
- **six syllables per line (three stressed)**

2. Alliteration

- odd: two stresses
- even: first stress w/ previous line

3. Rhyming syllables

- odd: half-rhyme
- even: full rhyme

Prayer to Thor: stresses

A **scathe**-worm **bides** and **broods**,
brewing **noisome** **poison**:
seething, **sly**, it **slithers**,
spreading **deadly** **venom**;

Wrangler **with** the **ring** of
reiver's **foaming** **home**field,
strike **against** this **sickness**!
slay this **furtive** **serpent**!

dróttkvætt: summary

1. Structure

- two groups of four lines each
- six syllables per line (three stressed)

2. Alliteration

- **odd: two stresses** **even: first stress w/ previous line**

3. Rhyming syllables

- odd: half-rhyme even: full rhyme

Prayer to Thor: alliteration

A scathe-worm **b**ides and **b**roods,
brewing noisome poison:
seething, **s**ly, it **s**lithers,
spreading deadly venom;

Wr**r**angler with the **r**ing of
reiver's foaming homefield,
strike against this **s**ickness!
slay this furtive **s**erpent!

dróttkvætt: summary

1. Structure

- two groups of four lines each
- six syllables per line (three stressed)

2. Alliteration

- odd: two stresses
- even: first stress w/ previous line

3. Rhyming syllables

- odd: half-rhyme
- even: full rhyme

Prayer to Thor: full rhyme in even lines

A scathe-worm bides and broods,
brewing **noisome** **poison**:
seething, sly, it slithers,
spreading **deadly** venom;

Wrangler with the ring of
reiver's **foaming** **home**field,
strike against this sickness!
slay this **furtive** **serpent**!

Prayer to Thor: half-rhyme in odd lines

A scathe-worm **bides** and **broods**,

brewing noisome poison:

seething, sly, it **slith**ers,

spreading deadly venom;

Wr**an**gler with the **ring** of

reiver's foaming homefield,

strike against this **sick**ness!

slay this furtive serpent!

Writing skaldic verse

1. Tackle two lines at a time:
 - Odd line: two alliterating stresses
half rhyme (of 2 syllables)
 - Even line: first stress alliterates with line #1 alliteration;
full rhyme (of 2 syllables)
2. Adjust syllables (six per line) and stresses (three per line)
3. Fix alliterations/rhymes that broke
4. Repeat from #2...

Prayer to Thor against COVID 19

A scathe-worm bides and broods,
brewing noisome poison:
seething, sly, it slithers,
spreading deadly venom;

Wrangler with the ring of
reiver's foaming homefield,
strike against this sickness!
slay this furtive serpent!

Vituð er enn – eða hvat?

Skaldic Project Home: <https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=skaldic>

Includes:

- Kari Ellen Gade, “The metres of skaldic poetry.”

URL: <https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=doc&i=717>

- Edith Marold, “The diction of skaldic poetry.”

URL: <https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=doc&i=736>

(Originally published in Diana Whaley (ed.), *Poetry from the Kings' Sagas 1: From Mythical Times to c. 1035*. Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages 1. Turnhout: Brepols, 2012.)

Poetic forms in *dróttkvætt*

- *lausavísa* (“loose verse”): not part of an extended poem
- *flokkr*: long poem of many stanzas
- *drápa* : long poem with a *stef* (refrain)
 - *stef* is usually two lines (sometimes four)
 - usually concludes a stanza or (sometimes) *helming*
 - can mark transitions between sections
 - can vary between sections

This is the beginning of a skaldic poem about the seasons and was my first attempt to render the skaldic meter of *dróttkvætt* in English. The two stanzas describe my experiences 1) on the northeast coast of England at sunrise on the winter solstice, and 2) at a stone circle in the English Lake District on the spring equinox. More stanzas will be written if/when I have the opportunity to spend the summer solstice and the fall equinox somewhere equally cool.

– Ann Gróa Sheffield

At flood-tide's swell I stood
beside the gannet's land;
wind-gusts stroked the sand
and stirred the running current.
I met, as waning Mani's
moonlight shone on dune,
the rays of Sól arising;
the rim of earth gave birth.

*Sun was set and moon was
stationed, sparks to mark the
march of time, the turning
tides, the years' abiding.*

Silent hills encircled
solitary hollow;
stones the ancients set
were standing vigil still;
wailing winds were hauling
a weight of freighted cloud,
yet bride of day was blazing
above the doves' grey road.

*Sun was set and moon was
stationed, sparks to mark the
march of time, the turning
tides, the years' abiding.*

The stanzas of this poem are in the Old Norse-Icelandic meter known as *dróttkvætt* (“court meter”), or as close as I have been able to get to it in English. *Dróttkvætt* is characterized by a particularly stringent set of metrical and poetic requirements. True *dróttkvætt* has some constraints on exactly where some stresses and rhymes should fall beyond those used here, but the fact that word-order is much less flexible in English than in Old Norse makes those constraints very difficult to satisfy, and I have not attempted to do so.

The poem’s refrain (*stef*) is not in *dróttkvætt*, but its presence nonetheless makes this poem a *drápa*, the most prestigious form of praise-poem.

– Ann Gróa Sheffield

Óðinsdrápa

*God of sages, god of fools,
Many edges, many aims,
Many masks, many names,
Many tasks, many tools:*

Fleet of foot is Sleipnir,
fording warded borders;
fierce and dire are Freki’s
feeding and Geri’s greed.
Huginn hovers, giving
heed to deeds unfolding;
Muninn carries counsel
to croak in Valgaut’s hall.

Draupnir drips with golden
dew, renewed forever;
you give ravens’ glitters
gleaming streams unceasing.
Straight and sure, your spear now
soars above the roaring
flame-of-combat’s clamor,
claims a peerless hero.

*God of sages, god of fools,
Many tasks, many tools,
Many edges, many aims,
Many masks, many names:*

Gangleri's guile I tell,
guises, pains, and prizes:
in Heidhrek's hall you well
were hosted, boastful god;
rede from riddles' turnings
wrested guest and ruler.
But Geirroth's wary welcome
won him sunless doom.

Suttung's sweet-limbed daughter
you sought, but brought to grief:
weaving lovers' words, you
wound your web around her.
She faithless found your oaths:
you fled that marriage-bed,
forsaking spousal vows
to steal the keel of dwarves.

*God of sages, god of fools,
Many tasks, many tools,
Many masks, many names,
Many edges, many aims:*

I tally wisdom's toll
truly, reward and rue:
star-of-brow you bore to
brink of drink-of-Mimir—
bloody ran the rain from
rim of Grimnir's payment—
you swiftly drained a draft
deeply steeped in lorecraft.

Sovereign-of-ravens
rode on hallowed gallows,
hung in storm-clouds' stronghold
snared in galling halter
above Brimir's limbs, by
bitter spear-blade spitted,
gift to giver given,
Gest by Gondlir tested.

*Many edges, many aims,
Many masks, many names,
Many tasks, many tools,
God of sages, god of fools.*

Notes

- 1.1–2 Sleipnir is Óðinn’s eight-legged horse, who can travel between the worlds.
- 1.3–4 Geri and Freki are Óðinn’s wolves. Their names literally mean “greedy” and “ravenous.”
- 1.5–7 Huninn (“thoughtful”) and Muninn (“mindful”) are Óðinn’s ravens.
- 1.8 “Valgaut” is one of Óðinn’s many names.
- 2.1 Draupnir is Óðinn’s golden arm-ring, which releases eight more golden rings every ninth night.
- 2.3 “Ravens’ glutters” is a kenning for “warriors”
- 2.7 “Flame of combat” is a kenning for “sword.”
- 3.1 “Gangleri” is one of Óðinn’s names.
- 3.3–6 The *Saga of Hervör and Heiðrek* tells how Óðinn, calling himself “Gestumblindi,” arrives at the court of King Heiðrekr and challenges him to a riddle-contest. The game continues for a long time, but Óðinn finally wins by his usual stratagem of asking, “~~What have I got in my pocket?~~” “What did Óðinn say to his son Baldr when he went to the pyre?”
- 3.7–8 According to the prose commentary preceding the Eddic poem *Grímnismál*, King Geirrøðr is a favorite of Óðinn, but Frigg suggests that Geirrøðr is lacking in hospitality. To find out the truth, Óðinn travels to Geirrøðr’s court disguised as Grímnir. Frigg warns Geirrøðr not to trust this strange guest, but Geirrøðr take this warning a bit too much to heart, and the king tortures Óðinn between two fires. At this point, poem begins: the suffering god relates a long catalogue of ancient lore that builds up to his revealing his true identity and cursing Geirrøðr. Another prose passage concludes the tale: aghast, Geirrøðr jumps up to release his guest, but he trips and impales himself on his own sword. I have indulged myself in making these two lines metrically imperfect to reflect Geirrøðr’s deadly misstep.
- 4.1–8 This stanza refers to Óðinn’s theft of the mead of poetry from the giant Suttungr and his daughter Gunnlöð. In Snorri’s account, Óðinn seduces Gunnlöð, but there is no evidence of seduction in the *Hávamál* verses that refer to this episode. I have followed Jens Peter Schjødt and especially Svava Jakonsdóttir in treating the relationship between Óðinn and Gunnlöð as a sacred marriage/initiation rather than an illicit affair (Jens Peter Schjødt, *Initiation Between Two Worlds: Structure and Symbolism in Pre-Christian Scandinavian Religion*, translated by Victor Hansen, Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2008, pp. 148–56; Svava Jakobsdóttir, “Gunnlöð and the Precious Mead (Hávamál),” translated by Katrina Attwood, in *The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, edited by Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, 27–57. New York: Routledge, 2002).
- 4.8 “Keel of dwarves” is a kenning for the mead of poetry.
- 5.3–8 These lines refer to Óðinn’s sacrifice of an eye to obtain a drink from Mimir’s Well. The drink confers wisdom and knowledge.
- 5.3 “Star-of-brow” is a kenning for “eye.”
- 5.4 “Drink-of-Mimir” is a kenning for Mimir’s well (*Mímisbrunnr*).
- 5.5 Grímnir is one of Óðinn’s name’s; his “payment” is his eye; its “rim” is the (now-empty) socket.
- 6.1–8 This stanza describes Óðinn’s sacrifice of himself to himself on Yggdrasil, the World-Tree. He was both hanged on the tree and pieced with a spear.

- 6.1 The “sovereign-of-ravens” is Óðinn; one of his names is *Hrafnáss*, “raven-god” (cf. also Huninn and Muninn, above).
- 6.3 “Storm-clouds’ stronghold” is a kenning for “sky.”
- 6.5 The giant-name “Brimir” has been interpreted as referring to Ymir, the primordial giant who was killed by Óðinn and his brothers. The gods made soil and stones from Ymir’s flesh and bones, so “Brimir’s limbs” is a kenning for “earth.”
- 6.8 “Gest” and “Gondlir” are both names for Óðinn.