

In Praise of Hawkwood



Written By:

Lord Cyriac Grymsdale (Kevin C. Towery)

Armored Champion of the Barony of the Sacred Stone (2016-2018)

Squire to Duke Valharic Caligua Aurelius, Knight of Atlantia



A Word to the Reader

I, Lord Cyriac Grymsdale, in response to a challenge given by Lord Dagr Bludaxe created this poem and presented it at Hawkwood's Baronial Birthday 2018. The terms of the challenge were twofold. The first was to be met on the tourney field at Baronial Birthday and fought to a single stroke, received with the dagger, great sword, broad sword with and without buckler, and either polearm or spear in the field. The second part was to craft a piece of poetry in any style and topic to be presented to their Excellencies of Hawkwood, Excellencies of Sacred Stone, and the populace for consideration.

Fierce as Freyja's beauty
Flame haired with grim surname
Slay steers the hawk's hearth-ship
Steady hand with deadeye

Rain mist ringing downward
Rainbow made cloud furrows
Secures elk sea fervor
Supports lord of men's cohort

Edward, elm of mountains
Ember of strife temper
A cure of speech crafter
Chill horn froth reaps goodwill

Fierce, yet wise wolf-feeders
Weave life-ban, sparks wheedled
Vexillum wield worthy
Wade thru green fields bladed



*Odin in eagle form obtaining the mead of poetry from Gunnlod, with Suttung in the background
(detail of the Stora Hammars III runestone, c. 700 CE)*

History

Skaldic poetry encompasses particular types of Old Norse verses attributed to named poets, or *skálds*, of Icelandic, or Norwegian origin during the 9th to 13th century. Five-sixths of skaldic stanzas are composed in the complex dróttkvætt metre. A drott was considered a Norse military/political unit and the chieftains of these units had their achievements immortalized in verses and sagas. The drott, or court was made up of a small coterie of relatives and followers who travelled, pillaged, and had adventures together. *Dróttkvætt* was known as the poetry ‘fit to be presented’ at this court.

Dróttkvætt is characterized by a strict system of syllable counting, internal rhyme, and alliteration. In addition, dróttkvætt, contains riddling syntax with famously cryptic *kenningar*, ensuring the audience are thoroughly challenged when trying to unravel a *skáld*'s veiled, often deliberately ambiguous, meaning. A standard dróttkvætt verse has eight lines, which break down into two four-line half stanzas known as *hellingar*. Each line consists of six syllables with three of the six stressed. Each line ends in a trochee, which is a two syllable word with the first syllable stressed. Each line pair then has three alliterative staves. In each odd line, two stressed syllables alliterate with the first syllable of the next even line. In even lines, the first word syllable often full rhymes or near-rhymes with the ending word.

Kenningar (kenning) is best defined as a multi-noun substitution for a single noun to create a descriptive phrase used to refer to people or objects. Kennings were used metaphorically, such as “oar-steed” describes a ship, in Skaldic poetry. The number of concepts kennings could substitute was limited to around 100, which included warrior, weapons, battle, and women. Kennings could become complex and cryptic by replacing the determinant noun with another determinant. For example, “flame of battle” represents “sword” then replacing “battle” with “din of spears”, creates a *tivkennt* (twice-determined) kenning, as “flame of the din of spears” as named by the 13th-century poet Snorri Sturluson. If another determinant is added, making a four-part kenning, it becomes a *rekit* ("driven").

Method

As the poem was intended to praise Hawkwood, I started with researching Their Excellences’ interests and the activities they enjoy in the Society. I was advised Their Excellencies were fans of the popular escape room game, which require solving puzzles and riddles to win. With this knowledge, I narrowed my focus to skaldic poetry because of the ability to use kennings for riddles and also to pay homage to Lord Dagr Bludaxe’s, Hawkwood’s champion, Norse name.

My next step was to research and draft a list of various historical kennings, which I believed could be incorporated into a poem based on the traits and interests of Their Excellencies. However, a few *tivkennt* kennings I discarded because I could not force them to adhere to the rules of the metre. An example is “storm of the blood-ice” = “blood-ice” = “sword” = “storm of the sword” = “battle”. The kenning is five syllables with zero alliterative staves and no feasible way of adding a sixth syllable to meet the requirement of two alliterative staves in an odd line.

When I started to write lines, I started first with picking a kenning and built the line around it. From the kenning I determined a trochee for the end of the line and used the remaining syllables for the beginning. I relied heavily on websites for syllable counters to ensure I stuck as close as

possible to a six syllable count. There is some historical allowance for a seven syllable count if several one syllable words are used, which I took advantage of in the line “Supports lord of men’s cohort”. I also used websites, which highlighted stressed syllables to ensure I picked words that were true trochees.

At first the approach produced several solid lines, but had to be refined as I tried to create a cohesive poem. Historically lines in a dróttkvætt never have a sentence spread over multiple lines, so it was important for each line to convey a single idea or thought. However, I found difficulty with tying several lines together to create an overarching theme and adhere to the metre with my initial approach. As I made progress on the poem, I moved from focusing on a kenning to the idea of the line. Once I had an idea I wanted to convey, I looked up synonyms and used various websites to see what words would rhyme. In the case of even lines, I also looked for a word that rhymed and was a trochee.

To start the poem, my initial helmingar was about Baroness Gracia’s leadership of the barony and her archery skills:

Slay steers the hawk’s hearth-ship
Steady hand with deadeye
Rain mist ringing downward
Rainbow made cloud furrows

Granted the lines met the rules, but the readability was poor and difficult to understand. To improve the flow and readability, I decided to break the pairs up. I added lines to create a full verse dedicated to describing Her Excellency and then led into describing her archery skills.

I tried my hand at crafting a kenning with the line “rainbow made cloud furrows” in the second helmingar. Baroness Gracia’s device contains a rainbow and a winged Pegasus, which I believed pays homage to the character Rainbow Dash from My Little Pony. I found Rainbow Dash in My Little Pony maintains the weather and in an episode cleared a cloudy sky by kicking the clouds, which gave me the idea to create a kenning referring to arrows and tie into the preceding line, which was also weather related.

The first helmingar about Baron Edward ended up developing naturally, as often the kenning [tree] of [noun] is used to represent a warrior. I decided to go with elm as the tree, as it alliterated with Edward. Elms are also a common wood used in coffins and associated with death, so it helped reinforce the theme of warrior. The second helmingar also was a bit easier, as there were plenty of existing kennings for ale/beer/mead, which helped for alluding to His Excellency’s brewing skills.

I was brainstorming about the topic of the last stanza when I learned the barony of Hawkwood was awarded the Vexillum Atlantiae for prowess on the fields of battle at Gulf Wars. Inspired, and with access to numerous kennings about battle, I decided the last stanza would help immortalize the event in words. The most troublesome part of the stanza was including “Vexillum”, which takes up half a line at three syllables.

Observations

This is one of my first attempts at writing a skaldic poem and found it to be extremely challenging when it came to sticking to the strict dróttkvætt metre. In my next endeavor, I plan to develop my own kennings to help create a more custom tailored poem. One version of skaldic poetry I would like to create in the future has the first word full rhyme with the ending word in odd lines and even lines adhere to near rhymes.

Original Poem	Poem with translated kennings
Fierce as Freyja's beauty Flame haired with grim surname Slay steers the hawk's hearth-ship Steady hand with deadeye	Fierce as Freyja's beauty Flame haired with grim surname Slay steers the Barony of Hawkwood Steady hand with deadeye
Rain mist ringing downward Rainbow made cloud furrows Secures elk sea fervor Supports lord of men's cohort*	Arrows! More arrows! Secures barony's bounty Supports King's army
Edward, elm of mountains Ember of strife temper A cure of speech crafter Chill horn froth reaps goodwill	Edward, warrior Sword temper (fencer) A brewer Chill beer reaps goodwill
Fierce, yet wise wolf-feeders Weave life-ban, sparks wheedled Vexillum wield worthy Wade thru green fields bladed	Fierce, yet wise warriors Weave death, lives taken Vexillum wield worthy Wade thru battle fields
*Line has seven syllables	

Bibliography

Lindow, J., 'Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry', *Scandinavian Studies* (1975)

LINDOW, J. (2012). Kenning. In R. Green, S. Cushman, & C. Cavanagh (Eds.), *The Princeton encyclopedia of poetry and poetics* (4th ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Retrieved from <https://search-credoreference-com.contentproxy.phoenix.edu/content/entry/prpoetry/kenning/0>

skaldic poetry. (2016). In Helicon (Ed.), *The Hutchinson unabridged encyclopedia with atlas and weather guide*. Abington, UK: Helicon. Retrieved from https://search-credoreference-com.contentproxy.phoenix.edu/content/entry/heliconhe/skaldic_poetry/0

Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/db.php>

Sroka, N. (1990). *The syllable: Evidence from icelandic skaldic poetry* (Order No. 9118058). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (303843604). Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.contentproxy.phoenix.edu/docview/303843604?accountid=35812>

Whaley, D., 'Skaldic Poetry', in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 479-502