

**THE USE OF KENNINGS IN  
ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE**

David Simpson

The South Charleston Senior High School

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## THE USE OF KENNINGS IN ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE

The kenning was an interesting literary technique used by ancient Anglo-Saxon poets for many centuries.

### I. Kennings were first used as synonyms.

- A. Alliteration in Old Norse works required that at least two words begin with the same sound.
- B. Synonyms were required so that a line of poetry could be alliterated.
- C. Kennings were developed as synonyms for use in alliterating poetry.

### II. The early kennings were comparatively simple in structure.

- A. A “simple kenning” will be defined as a kenning which expresses a single idea or thought.
- B. Examples of early kennings are “world-candle” (sun), “sun-table” (sky), and “horse of the sea” (ship).
- C. Kennings became so popular in their early stages that about one-third of the text of *Beowulf* is composed of them.
- D. Some kennings became so common that they became clichés, such as “ring-giver” for every prince.

### III. Kennings gradually increased in complexity.

- A. The courtly language used by the Norse court-poets while performing before nobility caused kennings to increase in sophistication.
- B. Kennings came to be “compounded” upon one another: for example, if “ship” was a “sea-stallion” and the sea was the “whale-road”, then a ship became a “stallion of the whale-road”.

### IV. Compound kennings.

- A. A “compound kenning” will be defined as one or more kennings used inside of another kenning.
- B. Compound kennings became “miniature riddles”.

C. An example of a compound kenning is: “provider to the swans of the mead of battle”: “mead of battle” is blood, swans of blood are ravens, and a provider to ravens is a warrior.

V. Kennings were eventually phased out; kennings were deciphered by Snorri Sturluson in the *Prose Edda*.

VI. Appendix A—Simple Kennings

VII. Appendix B—Compound Kennings

## THE USE OF KENNINGS IN ANGLO-SAXON LITERATURE

by David G. Simpson

The *scop*, or poet, of Anglo-Saxon times relied to a great extent on the metaphor to describe everyday objects in a colorful language. The type of metaphor that he used, known as the *kenning*, was a compound composed of two words which became the formula for a specific object.<sup>1</sup> This kenning came to be an interesting literary technique that would be used by ancient Anglo-Saxon poets for many centuries. Kennings were not, however, originated as an end in themselves, but were developed to be used as synonyms in poetic verse.

The poetry of Anglo-Saxon times was not in the form of rhymed verse as is often the case to-day. The popular literary technique of the Anglo-Saxon period was *alliteration*, that is, the repetition of initial consonant sounds in two or more neighboring words.<sup>2</sup> For example, the line “ofer brade brimu, Brytene sohtan” (“over the broad sea, they sought the Britons”) contains the consonantal combination *br* three times.<sup>3</sup> Such alliterating words, however, were not always easy to create, and the *scop* frequently found himself searching for synonyms which would alliterate with the words he wished to use in a line of poetry. Eventually, the *scop* was forced to create his own synonyms. These synonyms, actually a form of metaphor, came to be known as *kennings* (*kenningar* in the Anglo-Saxon dialect).

The first kennings used by the *scops* were comparatively simple in structure: they expressed a single idea or thought and were compounds usually composed of two words. Examples of these “simple kennings”, as they will be called, are *merehengest* (“horse of the sea”, ship), *sólarborð* (“sun-table”, the sky); and *hildenædre* (“battle-serpent”, arrow). Kennings such as these soon became so popular that about one-third of the text of *Beowulf* is composed of them.<sup>4</sup> Such frequent use, however, caused some kennings to become clichés, such as “ring-giver” for every prince.<sup>5</sup> This caused the very idea of kennings to begin to stagnate, and many *scops* attempted to find another way to use this colorful metaphor.

A new possibility for the kenning was developed by the Norse court-poets who performed before nobility. The ornate, courtly language used in the courts led the *scop* to bring the kenning up to a new level of sophistication.<sup>6</sup> The type of phrase that resulted, to be called a “compound kenning”, might be described as a “kenning within a kenning”. For example, if “ship” was a “horse of the sea” and the sea was the “whale-road”, then a ship became a “horse of the whale-road”. These compound kennings came to be so popular that much of the Anglo-Saxon and Norse poetry of the time contained a great many of them. The degree of sophistication of kennings did not, however, stop with the level of “horse of the whale-road”.

Compound kennings eventually reached a stage of complexity which would classify them more as “miniature riddles” than as a literary genre. A simple kenning would be used inside another kenning; the resulting kenning was placed within another kenning, and so forth. This process was carried out to such a great extent that an entire phrase, indeed, an entire sentence, could be considered as a single kenning which expressed a single idea. An example of this type of expression would be “. . . provider to the swans of the mead of battle . . .”. The “mead of battle” is blood; swans of blood are ravens; and a provider to the ravens is “warrior”.<sup>7</sup> It should be pointed out, though, that this is a comparatively simple example of this complex type of kenning.

Kennings such as this soon reached a stage of such complexity that the reading of literature containing them became cumbersome and tedious. Kennings began to lose some of their popularity when the Icelandic statesman and historian Snorri Sturluson deciphered a number of them in the *Prose Edda* around the thirteenth century.<sup>8</sup> These explanations appear principally in the second portion of the *Prose Edda*, where Sturluson teaches Scaldic dictation as well as the construction of kennings by telling stories and quoting examples of Scaldic verse.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, with Sturluson’s work, much interest in the kenning was lost, and an interesting literary technique which had become popular with poets for many centuries came to be obsolete, and the Age of the Kenning came to a quiet end.

APPENDIX A  
SIMPLE KENNINGS

Literal translation	Meaning	Anglo-Saxon	Reference
battle-serpent	arrow	hildenædre	4
battle-shower	flight of arrows	hildescur	4
thunder-fire	battle	eldþruma*	3
battle-dance	battle	hildardanz*	3
battle-sport	battle	hildarleikur*	3
sword-trouble	battle	sverðaraun*	3
mead of battle	blood		4
sword-water	blood		4
sword's dew	blood		4
battle-icicle	blood	hildegieel	4
battle-sweat	blood	hildeswat	4
bone-chamber	body		7
bone-house	body		4
twilight-spoiler	dragon		5
joy of a bird	feather		2
death chamber	grave		10
heath-stepper	horse		10
feeding-wolves	men	vargfæðandi*	3
ring-giver	prince		5
sea-garment	sail		6
whale-road	sea	hronrad	2
sea monster's home	sea		1
home of the winds	sea	windgeard	2
gannet's bath	sea	ganotesbæð	2
swan-road	sea		5
Viking's moon	shield		4
foamy-necked floater	ship		2
horse of the sea	ship	merhengest	4
wave-skimmer	ship		8
ocean-stallion	ship		10
sun-table	sky	sólarborð*	3
gods' chair	sky	ragnastóll*	3
gods' curtain	sky	ragnatjald*	3
road of the gods	sky	ragnabraut*	3

Literal translation	Meaning	Anglo-Saxon	Reference
corpse-dragon	spear		4
ash-wood	spear		9
world-candle	sun		1
gods' beacon	sun		2
candle of the sky	sun		7
gem of heaven	sun		7
leaving of hammer	sword		1
wolf of wounds	sword		4
light of battle	sword	hildeleoma	4
earth-walker	traveler		10
battle-wolf	warrior	hildewulf	4
sword's tree	warrior		4
peace-weaver	woman		8
dwelling-ornament	woman		8
falcon's field	wrist		4

\*Old Norse.

#### References.

- (1) Quasha, George. *Beowulf*. New York, 1965.
- (2) Preminger, Alex. *Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton, New Jersey, 1965.
- (3) Glendening, P.J.T. *Teach Yourself Icelandic*. New York, 1976.
- (4) Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Kenning," *New Yorker*, LI (January 26, 1976).
- (5) *The Reader's Companion to World Literature*. New York, 1956.
- (6) Wrenn, C.L. *A Study of Old English Literature*. New York, 1967.
- (7) Kneer, Leo B. *England in Literature*. Glenview, Illinois, 1973.
- (8) Grohskopf, Bernice. *From Age to Age—Life and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England*.
- (9) Benét, William Rose. *The Reader's Encyclopaedia*. New York, 1965.
- (10) Cunliffe, John W. *Century Readings in English Literature*.

## APPENDIX B

### COMPOUND KENNINGS

(1) “Dispenser of the flames of the falcon’s field.”

Overall meaning: “a generous king”.

(2) “Provider to the swans of the mead of battle.”

Overall meaning: “warrior”.

(3) “The dweller of the top of the beast yoked to the wavers.”

Overall meaning: “captain”.

(4) “The killer of the giant’s offspring  
broke the strong bison of the gull’s meadow.  
So the gods, while the keeper of the bell despaired,  
destroyed the seashore’s hawk.  
The horse that rides the reefs  
found no help in the King of the Greeks.”  
—Njal’s Saga

Meaning: “Thor  
broke the ship.  
So the gods, while the Christian priest despaired,  
destroyed the ship.  
The ship  
found no help in Jesus.”



(5) “The dyers of the wolf’s fangs  
squandered the red swan’s meat.  
The hawk of the sword’s dew  
fed on the heroes in the field.  
The serpents of the Viking’s moons  
fulfilled the will of the Irons.”  
—Egil Skallagrimsson, warrior at Brunanburh

Meaning: “The victors  
squandered the dead.  
The raven  
fed on the heroes in the field.  
The spears  
fulfilled the will of the gods.”

Reference: Borges, Jorge Luis. “The Kenning,” *New Yorker*, LI (January 26, 1976).

## Footnotes

- [1] *Beowulf*, ed. George Quasha (New York, 1965), p. 25.
- [2] *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts, 1974), p. 30.
- [3] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Kenning", *New Yorker*, LI (January 26, 1976), p. 35.
- [4] Tom Burns Haber, *A Comparative Study of Beowulf and the Aeneid* (New York, 1968), p. 66.
- [5] *Beowulf*, p. 26.
- [6] C.L. Wrenn, *A Study of Old English Literature* (New York, 1967), p. 49.
- [7] Borges, p. 36.
- [8] *The Reader's Companion to World Literature* (New York, 1967), p. 244.
- [9] Stefán Einarsson, "The Elder Edda", *Collier's Encyclopaedia*, 1960 ed., (New York, 1960), VI, 519.

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- Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Kenning," *New Yorker*, LI (January 26, 1976), 35-36.
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