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Hannah Burrows*
Riddles and Kennings

Abstract: The skaldic kenning is frequently described as 'riddling' or 'riddle-like'. Valuable work has been done (e. g. Lindow 1975) in establishing the structural, linguistic, and cognitive similarities between kennings and riddles, but this has usually been done in terms of the broad modern English sense(s) of the word 'riddle' or 'riddling'. This paper, more specifically, explores the comparison by examining Old Norse riddles, namely items described as *gátur* in their textual setting, and Old Norse kennings, in the context of each other. In doing so it highlights Old Norse poetic techniques of play and of cognition, how 'riddling' strategies work in context, and how both riddles and kennings provide fresh ways of perceiving and understanding the world.

Keywords: riddle, kenning, enigma, poetical treatises, skaldic poetry, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*

It is something of a commonplace – if indubitably an apt one – to describe the skaldic kenning as 'riddling' or 'riddle-like'. The similarity between the two forms was observed more than a century ago by Finnur Jónsson (1901, S. 380), reinforced by Andreas Heusler (1923, S. 131–2), and now appears regularly as a convenient shorthand for describing the kind of linguistic and conceptual play kennings involve (e. g. Clunies Ross 2005, S. 2; Marold 2012, S. lxxxiii). Valuable work has been done before (e. g. Lindow 1975) in establishing the structural, linguistic, and cognitive similarities between kennings and riddles, but this has usually been done in terms of the broad modern English sense(s) of the word 'riddle' or 'riddling'.[1] This paper has a different purpose. It explores the comparison by examining Old Norse riddles, namely items described as *gátur* in their textual setting, and Old

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*Corresponding author: Hannah Burrows, Centre for Scandinavian Studies, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland, e-mail: hannah.burrows@abdn.ac.uk

Norse kennings, in the context of each other. In doing so it highlights Old Norse poetic techniques of play and of cognition, how 'riddling' strategies work in context, and hopes to shed some light on the appropriately enigmatic 'genre' of Old Norse *gátur* and on some kennings in their context.

Kennings and riddles: solving, solutions, and beyond

Like the English word 'riddle', the Old Norse noun *gáta* has a fairly broad definition covering a range of items. The *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (*ONP*) cites three definitions.[2] The first is 'riddle, to be solved', which includes the famous corpus of riddles in *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (itself a fairly eclectic collection, including an *ofljóst* stanza and one using the *greppaminni* question and answer format, as well as stanzas relying on metaphorical and personified descriptions of objects, or listing unusual or apparently paradoxical attributes of their referents), together with examples from the religious texts *Origo Crucis* and *Stjórn*. The second definition is 'enigma, puzzle', with exemplary citations from, for instance, *Katrínar saga*, the romance *Kirjalax saga*, a translation of St Paul's 'through a glass darkly' in a homily, and Óláfr Þórðarson's so-called *Third Grammatical Treatise*, to the latter of which I shall return later. Finally and most broadly is the definition 'guess, assumption, suspicion', which I shall also discuss later. In this paper I shall focus on poetic examples of *gátur*, and in particular the corpus of 37 riddles collected across the three medieval redactions of *Hervarar saga*.

The paper also takes a broad and inclusive approach to the kenning, considering non-metaphorical as well as metaphorical periphrases, largely based on the discussion by Edith Marold (2012, S. lxx–lxxxv)). As identified by Rudolf Meissner (1921), there are only just over one hundred possible kenning referents, and skalds followed and varied 'typical circumlocutionary patterns' (Marold 2012, S. lxx) to create their own unique kennings. This 'kenning system' was not only a tool for skalds, but an aid to listeners, who would be able to recognize variations on a known pattern and understand the referent. Bjarne Fidjestøl (1997, S. 48–50) suggested that this system would have led to a loss of 'motivation', so when listeners heard a variation of, for example, 'the horse of the ocean' [SHIP] for the nth time they would no longer conjure vivid mental images of horses crashing through waves or consider the ways sailors are like (and not like) horse-riders, or even

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2 There are twenty-eight recorded instances in *ONP*, but the list is not exhaustive.

think about the comparability of different means of transportation or different types of journey. The kenning pattern, in this view, has simply become a linguistic sign for the referent. The extent to which this theory is true, or where and when it is true, is still debatable, and studies of the work of individual skalds often feature discussion of the extent to which their kennings are alive with creative effect.

The underlying 'motivation' of kennings and the poetic work they perform are important to a consideration of the comparability of kennings and riddles, and I will return to this issue in the following discussion. However, at this point, it is reasonable to assume that audiences did not have to 'solve' a kenning every time they met one, but at most to 're-solve' or simply recognise it. This strategy may be reflected in the word *kenning* itself. Both the noun *kenning* and the verb *kenna* have a range of meanings in Old Norse, making the medieval evidence difficult to interpret (Marold 2012, S. lxxiii), but relevant meanings of *kenna* include 'to recognize', 'to know' and 'to call (by a name)'. Some kennings require more, or more specific, knowledge than others – or appear to. Kennings that have mythological or legendary elements are usually thought of as requiring a knowledge of the myth or legend in question, and to keep that knowledge alive is the ostensible purpose of the writing of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (ed. Faulkes 2009, S. 5). For example, to understand that *mjǫð Suðra* 'the mead of Suðri' (Gísli Súrsson, *Lausavísur*, 20, ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, I, 100) is a kenning for poetry, one appears to need to know (a) that Suðri is a dwarf and (b) the myth of the mead of poetry, the liquid inspiration that dwarfs play a prominent role in creating. In practice, however, extensive knowledge of these myths is not required to understand the referent. One does not need to know *Vǫluspá*, where Suðri is mentioned in st. 11, or Snorri's explanation that he is one of four dwarfs named after the cardinal directions who hold up the sky (ed. Faulkes 2005, S. 12), to learn that Suðri is a dwarf-name;[3] one does not even need to know the whole story of the mead of poetry to know that 'the drink of dwarfs' signifies poetry: knowing the pattern is sufficient. In fact, since the full story of the mead of poetry means that poetry can be designated the drink of dwarfs or giants or gods (ed. Faulkes 2009, S. 11), it would be enough to know the broader kenning pattern to assume, from the 'drink of X' formula, that Suðri is a supernatural being of some sort and the referent 'poetry' is intended. The base-word 'drink' is used almost exclusively in kennings for either poetry or blood (the latter usually the drink of wolves or carrion birds), so context could resolve the matter without, technically, knowing anything about Suðri or about

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3 Cf. the extensive lists of *þulur* or poetic synonyms in Snorri's *Edda* (ed. and trans. Gurevich 2017).

the myth of the mead of poetry.[4] Poets can weave more complex webs of allusion, and audiences enjoy richer literary and aesthetic experiences, if they do know the myths, however.

In his own article 'Riddles, Kennings, and the Complexity of Skaldic Poetry', John Lindow (1975) omits, for kennings, the criterion 'the referent of the elements is to be guessed' from the riddle-definition of the folklorists Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes.[5] Otherwise, by drawing on anthropologists' and folklorists' attempts to describe the structure of the riddle, Lindow suggests that 'it is formally possible to define kennings and riddles with one and the same definition' (*ibid*., S. 312). Elsewhere in the article he concludes that kennings constitute 'a genre which may structurally be regarded as a subclass of riddles' (*ibid*., S. 317). Broadening the focus of the article to include *heiti* and word order, as well as kennings, Lindow used the correspondences between riddles and skaldic language in service of the point that the difficulty of skaldic diction and syntax – its riddling nature – made it exclusive, a 'secret language' (*ibid*., S. 323) only available to the initiated, elite 'community of knowers': the *drótt* (king's retinue).

However, as indicated above, Lindow's comparison is not based on the Old Norse riddles specifically, but on riddles more generally, including those from societies in which riddles 'serve as formal indicators of initiation' (*ibid*., S. 321). Lindow reasonably parallels these knowledge tests with Old Norse wisdom contests such as those represented in the eddic poems *Vafþrúðnismál* and *Alvíssmál*. In the case of the most famous of the Old Norse riddles, those contained in *Hervarar saga*, the riddles also effectively constitute a wisdom contest where one participant's head is at stake, and parallels have been drawn before between the episode and the wisdom poems. However, there is no evidence that *gátur* were ever actually used with an initiatory purpose in medieval Scandinavia, and whether riddles are a test of knowledge or of something more like lateral thinking is a subject of ongoing debate in the scholarly literature, since it is surely dependent on context and

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4 This strategy is used by modern scholars when encountering a name not otherwise attested; see e. g. Clunies Ross's note to the kenning *jór Íva* 'steed of Ívi' in her forthcoming edition of Egill Skallagrímsson, *Lausavísur*, 26/1: 'The name Ívi is not recorded elsewhere but is presumed to be a sea-king name, as a common ship-kenning pattern has 'horse' (or some other land animal) as base-word, with the determinant the name of a sea-king'. I am grateful to Margaret for permission to quote from her edition prior to its publication.

5 Georges' and Dundes' definition of the riddle is as follows: 'A riddle is a traditional, verbal expression which contains one or more descriptive elements, a pair of which may be in opposition; the referent of the elements is to be guessed' (1963, S. 113). Lindow's extrapolated description of the kenning is: 'the kenning may be described as a multi-expandable traditional verbal poetic expression of essentially binary structure consisting of one or more descriptive elements which may or may not be in opposition' (1975, S. 317).

intention. For those societies where riddles mark a rite of passage, for instance, knowing the answer is not the same as working out the answer (Haring 1974). For the Old Norse riddles – perhaps in contrast to *kenning* – it may be telling that, as the *ONP*'s third definition suggests, the noun *gáta* also means 'a guess', and the related verb *geta*, when used with the genitive, means 'to guess' (also 'to think, mean; mention': Cleasby, Vigfusson and Craigie 1957: *geta*). This is interesting for a number of reasons. Where the *Hervarar saga* riddles come from, and whether they were well known in folk tradition or were rather learned curiosities, is not well understood. The native word given to the genre does not well reflect classical riddling, at least not of the educational sort that medieval Icelanders and Scandinavians may have been exposed to. The Latin term *aenigma* derives from Greek *ainigma*, itself from *ainissesthai* 'to speak allusively or obscurely', ultimately from *ainos* 'apologue, fable' (*OED*: *enigma*). Isidore of Seville defines *aenigma* in his *Etymologies* thus: *aenigma est quaestio obscura quae difficile intelligitur, nisi aperiatur* (I.xxxvii.26; ed. Lindsay 1911) 'Enigma is an obscure question that is difficult to understand, unless it is explained'. The Latin enigmata used in schoolrooms, for instance those of Aldhelm and others in Anglo-Saxon England, circulated with their solutions in the titles. There was no need to guess or work out the answer, the point was to understand the figure of speech – as well as to admire the ingenuity of the riddle and its composer. The Old English Exeter Book riddles, however, are famously not solved in their manuscript context, leading their centuries of readers to puzzle them out with no hope of ever knowing if they have the 'right answer'.

In *Hervarar saga*, Heiðrekr consistently replies to the puzzles put to him with *Góð er gáta þín, Gestumblindi, getit er þeirar* (ed. Tolkien 1960, S. 33–44, 80–82) 'Your riddle is good, Gestumblindi, it is guessed',[6] but he apparently answers immediately in almost every case. In one instance, however (in which the riddle text is now partly lost, but which has sexual overtones), he invites his retainers to solve it: *Þessa gátu skulu ráða hirðmenn mínir* (*ibid*., S. 82) 'My retainers must interpret this one'. We are then told, *Þeir gátu margs til ok eigi fagrs mjǫk* (*ibid*.) 'They made many guesses, and none very attractive'. The retainers are thus shown to attempt to work out the riddle, but fail. The episode does not conclusively rule out the interpretation that Heiðrekr has had privileged access to an extensive repertoire of riddles to which he has learned the answers (i. e. that he already knows the answers), but a more attractive supposition is that he is to be seen as superior at logic, poetry, or 'guessing' (i. e. that he works out the answers). For the saga audience, of course, the riddles come with their solutions, given the dialogue format of the episode, though the narrative could offer a good opportunity for what

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6 Translations throughout are my own where not otherwise stated.

Lars Lönnroth (1979) has termed a 'double scene', with potential spaces in a per-formance of the saga for audiences to make their own guesses before Heiðrekr's reply is given.

The Norse term *gáta* is not derived in the same way as the equivalent concept in other Germanic languages, from the proto-Germanic **redan* (> ON *ráða*), with its range of meanings including 'to explain, interpret', the stem for the modern English 'riddle'.[7] The verb *ráða* is however used in *Hervarar saga* for the process of solving the riddles posed there (ed. Tolkien 1960, S. 82), as well as in other riddling contexts, for instance the runic riddle in *Buslubæn* 9 in *Bósa saga* (ed. and trans. Heizmann 2017, S. 36) and in an inscription from Bø church, Telemark (N A104). *Getit* 'guessed' is used in *Hervarar saga* of the riddle that has been solved (ed. Tolkien 1960, S. 33–44, 80–82). Both terms suggest that the Germanic process of riddling involved interpretation, 'guessing', or working out, rather than already 'knowing'.

Nonetheless, although solutions, or referents, are vital to both riddles and kennings, they are not the sole reason for being of either of them. Treating the ken-ning as a mere linguistic sign and reading only for its referent ignores the poetic effects specific kennings create. 'The magic has gone', in the words of Christopher Abram (2019, S. 170). 'Our paraphrase has killed the poem dead, in an instant' (*ibid.*). For this reason, Abram is unhappy with a comparison between riddles and kennings:

> If leveling the kennings to their referents [...] undermines the stanza as a whole, it overmines the kennings themselves, reducing them upwards in the service of making sense of what the poet "meant." This process makes the appreciation of skaldic poetry little more than a glib party trick: *can you tell what it is yet?* For this reason I find unsatisfactory those theories which relate kennings to riddles. Although kennings are undoubtedly ludic at times, their purpose is not to be *solved* in the way that a riddle is. People who like riddles may take pleasure in considering kennings in that way, but to think of kennings *only* as problems that demand a single solution is a clear example of overmining. (*ibid.*, S. 167)

I fully agree with Abram's assessment of kennings: the poetic work they do amounts to much more than the sum of their parts. However, his argument relies on an unnecessarily reductive view of riddles themselves. I would extend the reasoning to encompass riddles as well as kennings: arriving at the solution, or referent, is not the sole purpose of either. Both Old Norse kennings and riddles encourage an appreciation of the terms in which they are expressed. Riddles, like

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7 Borysławski (2002, S. 37) points out that 'the Old English riddles never refer to themselves using the Old English word *rædelle* but by employing the term reserved for poetic and gnomic compo-sitions, that is ... *giedd*.'

kennings, involve a reassessment of their referent; they reveal qualities not usually at the forefront of our conceptualisation of a thing, but which are nonetheless there. As the poet Dan Pagis puts it, 'while a riddle that has been solved ceases to be a riddle for the solver, it does continue to exist for him as another kind of poem' (1996, S. 98). Ann Harleman Stewart, who compares Old English riddles and kennings, goes so far as to say that 'they are alike because they are not intended to mystify at all. Each is a form whose ostensible purpose is puzzlement, and each fails to puzzle. Both are, instead, used for other purposes' (1979, S. 115). Riddles both describe and create 'wonder': a common beginning to the *Hervarar saga gátur* is *Hvat er þat undra ...?* 'What is the wonder ...?' (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017b). Both riddles and kennings provide surprising ways of 'knowing' the things they describe.

The 'hidden similarity of things'

The term *gáta* is proposed as an equivalent for the Latin *aenigma* in the second part (called *Málskrúðsfræði* by modern scholars) of the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, attributed to the poet and author Óláfr Þórðarson: *Þess konar fígúru kǫllum vér gátu* (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1927, S. 86) 'this kind of figure we call *gáta*'.[8] In the *Third Grammatical Treatise*, Óláfr usually follows the source of his prose – Donatus' *Ars maior* or another text based on it – quite closely, but uses quotations from Norse poetry, instead of the original Latin, to exemplify each grammatical figure under discussion (Clunies Ross 2005, S. 191). In *Ars maior*, Donatus explains and exemplifies the figure *aenigma* thus:

> *aenigma est obscura sententia per occultam similitudinem rerum, ut mater me genuit, eadem mox gignitur ex me, cum significet aquam in glaciem concrescere et ex eadem rursus effluere.* (ed. Keil 1855, S. 402)

> *aenigma* is an obscure meaning on account of the hidden similarity of things, for example 'a mother bore me, soon the same is born from me', since it may signify that water changes into ice and flows out from it again.

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8 This observation continues: *ok er hon jafnan sett í skáldskap* (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1927, S. 86) 'and it is always rendered in poetry', giving a rather surprising indication that to Óláfr, the figure had to be versified (surprising given that such is not the case for Latin *aenigmata*, while a small number of Old Norse texts also use the word *gáta* to refer to prose examples). There is no equivalent observation in Donatus' *Ars maior*, though a similar comment may have existed in Óláfr's now-lost exemplar: the first-century Roman rhetorician Quintilian, for instance, had noted that poets use *aenigma* (*Institutio oratoria* 8.6.52), though he disapproves of the figure whereas there is no disapprobation in Óláfr's remarks.

Óláfr translates the definition closely: *Enigma er myrkt sen um leynda liking hlutanna* (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1927, S. 85) '*Enigma* is obscure meaning about the hidden similitude of things', and to exemplify, he quotes:[9]

> *Fara ek sá*
> *foldar moldbúa*
> *á sat nár á ná.* (*ibid.*, S. 86)

> I saw a soil-dweller of the earth travelling, a corpse sat on a corpse.

Unlike Donatus, Óláfr – interestingly, especially given the above discussion of differences between Latin educational riddles and 'Germanic' riddling – does not provide an explanation or solution for his example. However, a version of this riddle is also found in fuller form in the *Hervarar saga* collection, where it continues (Riddle 25, ll. 4–6):[10]

> *blindr reið blindum*   *brimleiðar til;*
>   *jór var andar vanr.*

> a blind thing rode on a blind thing to the surf-way [SEA]; the steed was lacking in breath. (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017b, S. 438)[11]

Hervarar saga does provide a solution, or rather two solutions. There are three medieval redactions of the saga, two of which (the so-called H and R redactions) have: *þar fanntu hest dauðan á ísjaka ok orm dauðan á hestinum, ok rak þat allt saman eptir ánni* (ed. Tolkien 1960, S. 37) 'there you found a dead horse on an ice-floe and a dead snake on the horse, and all together that drifted along the river'.[12]

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9 In Old Norse grammatical literature, *líking* often means 'analogy, similitude', which I have retained here for its closeness to the Latin original. However, it also means 'figure', 'form', 'physical likeness', 'comparison', all of which are apt for this discussion (*ONP*: *glíking*).

10 For convenience I refer to the riddles as 'Riddle 1', 'Riddle 2' etc., following the order in Burrows (2017b). 'Riddle 1' here equals, in the siglum of the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages edition, Gestumblindi, *Heiðreks gátur*, 1, and so forth.

11 The fact that Óláfr only quotes the first half is in keeping with his quotation practices throughout, rather than suggesting he did not know the rest of the riddle. There is no way of knowing whether he knew of this example from *Hervarar saga* itself, which is believed to have been composed in the form we now know it in the first third of thirteenth century (Torfi Tulinius 2002, S. 63, 234–89), or whether it was in more general circulation and Óláfr and the *Hervarar saga* compiler knew it independently.

12 As Tolkien (1960, S. 37, n. 4) has pointed out, this appears to be an over-literal interpretation of the riddle: the *jór* 'steed' is itself the ice-floe, a means of conveyance for the *moldbúi foldar* 'soil-dweller of the earth', rather than being a literal dead horse, and so *hestr dauðr á ísjaka* 'a dead serpent on an ice-floe' would solve the riddle by itself.

The third (U) redaction instead offers: *þar fanstu stein; hann mun hafa leigid i isi-aka; steirn er molldbui; þetta muntu hafa rekid* [emended to *sied reka* in Verelius 1672, S. 150] *allt samann a vatni; þar voru badir blindir og daudir* (ed. Jón Helga-son 1924, S. 137) 'There you found a stone; it must have lain on an ice-floe; a stone is a soil-dweller; this you must have driven ['seen driven' with Verelius' emenda-tion] all together on the water; there were both the blind and the dead'. Though disappointingly mundane in comparison, this alternative admittedly addresses the description provided. The fact that different solutions are offered in the dif-ferent redactions both strengthens the idea that riddles were engaged with and 'guessed', here by different redactors, and perhaps also suggests that they were not necessarily thought to have one single solution – in contrast to the majority of kennings.

Kennings, especially metaphorical kennings, can also be said to reveal a 'hid-den similarity of things'. Óláfr in particular associates kennings with metaphor, which is explained elsewhere in the treatise also in terms of *liking* 'similitude, comparison': *Með þessi fígúru eru saman settar allar kenningar í nórænum skáld-skap ok hon er mjǫk svá upphaf til skáld-skapar-máls* (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1927, S. 74–77) 'All the kennings in Norse poetry are put together with this figure and it is well-nigh the origin of the language of poetry'. Abram's suggestion that kennings, especially metaphorical kennings and *nýgjǫrvingar* 'extended metaphors', 'reveal in flashes the hidden richness of objects', is itself not dissimilar to the medieval understanding of riddles (Abram 2019, S. 183).

Kennings as *gátur* in Old Norse?

There is scant and somewhat conflicting explicit evidence as to whether kennings might actually be thought of as *gátur* in Old Norse texts. On the one hand, the *Third Grammatical Treatise* does not seem to associate kennings with the term *gáta* or the Latin *aenigma* (ed. Finnur Jónsson 1927, S. 85–6);[13] but on the other, a collection of stanzas made up of short, kenning-like constructions, first attested in a hand of c. 1500 in manuscript AM 625 4to (Kålund and Beckman 1908–18, II, S. cxcvi n. 1), are labelled *gátur* where they are copied into the Y redaction of the so-called *Laufás Edda* (ed. Faulkes 1979, S. 406). The anonymous *gátur* rely on a

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13 It might be noted here that the part of the riddle Óláfr quotes to illustrate *enigma* contains a kenning-like phrase, *moldbúi foldar* 'soil-dweller of the earth', but this seems to be no more than coincidence. Óláfr simply chose an example of a *gáta*, and in fact likely selected the rather bizarre example he did because it is, in a way, about ice, as Donatus's example also is.

mixture of general cultural knowledge and wordplay, rather than metaphor, and share an avian theme. For instance, *aldrtjón Ellu* 'life-loss of Ælla' (i. e. *örn* 'eagle', refers to the Northumbrian king killed during the viking incursions into the British Isles in 867, according to several sources by means of the so-called 'blood-eagle' rite (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017a, S. 632–3). This example is close to Einarr Skúlason's *geitunga Ellu* 'Ælle's birds' (*Haraldsdrápa* II, 3/1–2, ed. and trans. Gade 2009b, S. 546–7), accepted as an eagle kenning by the Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages project and by Meissner (1921, S. 121). Meanwhile, *útleidda sál* 'transcended soul' employs the device *ofljóst*, where the circumlocutory 'clue' replaces the synonymous *ǫnd* 'breath, life, spirit, soul', which then leads to the homonym *ǫnd* 'duck' (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017a, S. 634–5). One of the *Hervarar saga* riddles relies on *ofljóst* (Riddle 35), and it is frequently employed in skaldic kennings, for instance Eyvindr Finnsson's *Hǫgna mey* 'maiden of Hǫgni' (*Háleygjatal* 7/2), referring to Hildr in the Hjaðningavíg legend; the personal name Hildr is a homonym for *hildr* 'battle' (ed. and trans. Poole 2012a, S. 205).

The phrases in the anonymous *gátur* are not listed as kennings by either the Skaldic Project or by Meissner, but while, on the whole, they do not conform to known kenning patterns and have non-substitutable elements, they are similar to kennings in form and function. These *gátur* do not circulate with their solutions, but a number of the manuscripts in which they appear are annotated with proposed solutions – not always the same ones – in later hands (see further Burrows 2017a). Perhaps it is the combination of phrases into stanza units that qualifies them as *gátur*, though each component phrase has its own solution, related to the others via the theme of birds. This technique of combining related periphrases is also exploited in some skaldic stanzas, as will be discussed further below.

Kenning Referents and Riddle Referents

Before beginning to draw specific comparisons between the corpora of kennings and *gátur*, it should be stated that there are few correspondences between kenning referents and the referents or solutions of *gátur*. Kennings and riddles do not often describe the same thing. This is in many ways unsurprising. Some of the riddles do not have a neat single solution, some are situation-specific or deliberately obscure, and many concern everyday and in some cases low status objects such as dung beetles, cows, and flint, which the praise-poetry of kings has little need to refer to. (It may be noted, however, that many of the riddle referents are not completely out of place in skaldic verse: leeks, swans, and dew, for example, may have

little reason to star as referents of skaldic kennings, but make fine base-words for other kennings).

There are five objects which serve as both kenning referent and riddle solution: Bellows (Riddle 9; Meissner 1921 §105b.10), Hail (Riddle 10; Meissner 1921 §13), Arrow (Riddle 13; Meissner 1921 §74 arrow, spear), Sun (Riddle 15; Meissner 1921 §14), Waves (Riddles 21–24; Meissner 1921 §6). Another eleven riddle solutions have a similar though not exact correspondence with a kenning type, for instance Anchor (Riddle 6; Meissner 1921 §86 ship accessories) or Obsidian (Riddle 16; Meissner 1921 §3 stone, jewel). Nine riddles do not have a single referent and thus comparison cannot be exact, although in some cases different parts of the solution have correspondences in the kenning corpus, for example Riddle 36 Óðinn riding Sleipnir (cf. Meissner 1921 §88a *α* Óðinn; a single, unclassified Sleipnir kenning). Many such correspondences are with very rare kenning types, however, with only one or two examples in the extant corpus. Only three objects are described or conceptualised in broadly similar terms in both a riddle and a kenning pattern. Alcoholic drink is *orða tefill, / ok orða upphefill* 'hinderer of words, and instigator of words' in Riddle 1/4–5 (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017b, S. 410), and *heilsu máls* 'the cure of speech' in Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, 25/5 (ed. and trans. Gade 2017c, S. 1131; I will return to this example later). Riddle 2/4–5 describes a river and the sky as paths: *vegr var undir / ok vegr yfir* 'a way was under and a way over' (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017b, S. 411). This conceptualization is also found in kenning patterns; for bodies of water, for example: *lögröst* 'the water-way' in Sturla Þórðarson, *Hrafnsmál*, 5/1 (ed. and trans. Gade 2009e, S. 731), *lýrgata* 'the pollack-path' in Sigvatr Þórðarson, *Knútsdrápa*, 3/5 (ed. and trans. Townend 2012, S. 653); and for the sky: *flugrein svana* 'the flying-land of swans' in Gamli kanóki, *Harmsól*, 44/3 (ed. and trans. Attwood 2007, S. 112), *vegr sólar* 'the path of the sun' in Hallar-Steinn, *Rekstefja*, 10/8 (ed. and trans. Stavnem 2012, S. 908). Finally, waves are supernatural women, the daughters of Ægir, in the descriptions and solutions to Riddles 21–24 and, for instance, the kenning *élreifar dœtr Ægis* 'the storm-happy daughters of Ægir' in Sveinn, *Norðrsetudrápa*, 1/1–2 (ed. and trans. Clunies Ross 2017b, S. 399). In the case of the shield, on the other hand, which is an extremely common kenning referent, not a single extant kenning conceptualizes it in similar terms to those of the riddle (Riddle 27, Meissner 1921 §80).

Kennings in Context in Riddles

Some of the riddles in the *Hervarar saga* collection contain kennings or kenning-like phrases: for example, Riddle 28 manages to fit in three. Though they have

some similarities to kennings in the skaldic corpus, they are somewhat unconventional in their referents:

> *Nær var forðum*   *nösgás vaxin,*
> *barngjörn, sú er bar*   *bútimbr saman.*
> *Hlífðu henni*   *hálms bitskálmir;*
> *þó lá drykkjar*   *drynhraun yfir.*

> Long ago, a nostrils-goose [DUCK] was nearly grown, child-eager, who brought house-timber together. Biting-swords of straw [OX TEETH] protected her; yet the bellowing lava-field of drink [OX SKULL] lay over. (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017b, S. 442)

The solution given in the saga prose is as follows: *Þar hafði ǫnd búit hreiðr sitt í milli nautskjálka, ok lá haussinn ofan yfir* (ed. Tolkien 1960, S. 41) 'There a duck had built its nest between the jaw-bones of an ox, and the skull lay over [it]'. The curious compound *nösgás*, a *hapax legomenon* apparently meaning nostrils-goose or nose-goose, thus appears to be a duck kenning. While it is common in kennings that any bird (including the goose) can stand in base-word position for any other bird – in practice, usually carrion birds: ravens or eagles – the determinant more typically refers to the bird's activity on the battlefield, for instance *már sveita* 'seagull of gore' (Magnús berfœttr Óláfsson, *Lausavísur*, 3/3–4; ed. and trans. Gade 2009c, S. 387). The riddle's kenning *hálms bitskálmir* 'biting swords of straw' [OX TEETH] is faintly reminiscent of Stjǫrnu-Oddi's teeth-kenning *hvítgeira hvapta* 'white spears of mouths' (*Geirviðardrápa* 9/7; ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, II, S. 225), but the riddle's *bit-* 'biting' gives away the literal context in which the determinant *skálmir* 'swords' should be understood, while *hálms* 'of straw' makes the referent rather more situation-specific (referring only to a grazing animal) than many kennings allow. For a riddle-solver, these elements would help considerably in narrowing down the field of referents or solutions. Finally, the kenning *drynhraun drykkjar* 'the bellowing lava-field of drink' [OX SKULL] resembles Gísli Súrsson's *hraun kveifar* 'lava-field of the cap' (*Lausavísur*, 27/5; ed. Finnur Jónsson 1912–15, I, S. 102) for the head, but once again in the riddle the modifying *drynr* 'bellowing' (a term often used of cattle), seems to try to helpfully narrow down the field to refer to an ox (though rather confuses the matter since the animal in question needs to be long-deceased here rather than still bellowing). These kennings, then, show some affinity with, and perhaps knowledge of, skaldic kennings, but their 'secret language' is partly demystified with extra clues and situation-specific referents that allow the puzzle to be solved rather than recognised.

Yet in comparison one could consider kennings with an adjectival descriptor, such as Kálfr Hallson's *glæstrar rekkja skeljungs fjalla* 'the shining bed of the whale of the mountains' for gold (*Katrínardrápa* 6/6–7; ed. and trans. Wolf 2007, S. 936), or Kormákr Ǫgmundarson's *bláland Haka* 'the blue land of Haki' for the sea (*Lausavísur*, 37/2; ed. Finnur Jónsson 1915–18, I, S. 78). Here the kenning has an extra 'clue': 'it's shiny' or 'it's blue', if the listener is struggling with the *tvíkent* construction *rekkja skeljungs fjalla* 'the bed of the whale of the mountains', or does not know that Haki is a mythological sea-king. Not all adjectival elements of kennings are so explicitly helpful, of course, and the modifying adjectives may have other purposes in satisfying metrical requirements and creating visual imagery, but in instances like these examples we could think of kennings in context as having riddle-like clues built around them.

In fact, the structural similarities between riddles and kennings identified by Lindow and others suggest that theoretically, a riddle could be generated by building descriptors around a kenning, or that contrariwise, a kenning could be formed by paring a riddle back to its most concise form of expression.[14] Riddle 9 is built around a fairly common kenning pattern for sword, although the referent of the riddle is not itself 'sword' (it is 'bellows'):

> Hvat er þat undra,   er ek úti sá
>   fyrir Dellings durum?
> Ókyrrir tveir   andalausir
>   sára lauk suðu.

> What is the wonder that I saw outside before Dellingr's doors? Two unquiet things, without breath, cooked a leek of wounds [SWORD]. (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017b, S. 419)

There are at least three other instances of kennings with the same base-word and determinant (Anon, *Liðsmannaflokkr*, 3/6 and 9/6 and Skúli Þorsteinsson, Poem about Svǫldr, 2/8), the variant *benlaukr*, 'leek of wounds' (Þorkell Gíslason, *Búadrápa*, 7/2; ed. and trans. Lethbridge and Whaley 2012, S. 948) and the similar *ímunlaukr* 'battle-leek' (Eyvindr skáldaspillir Finnsson, *Lausavísur*, 8; ed. and trans. Poole 2012b, S. 226), *laukr randar* 'the leek of the shield' (Einarr skálaglamm Helgason, *Vellekla*, 8/3; ed. and trans. Marold et al. 2012, S. 292), and *laukar Mistar* 'Mist's <valkyrie's> leeks' (Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, 85/2; ed. and trans. Gade 2017c, S. 1196). Meissner (1921, §76γ) includes these examples in a larger kenning pattern emphasizing the flexibility of the sword blade, yielding many more examples. But even if this kenning pattern was so well known

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14 Lombardi (2017, S. 250), speculates along similar lines that myths might have been transformed into riddles to aid learning, and then 'lexicalized into kennings'.

as to have become 'demotivated' (Fidjestøl 1997, S. 48–52), the riddle composer chooses to bring the metaphor back to life, seeing both the leek and the sword as objects that are 'cooked'. In doing so the riddle creates a *draugr*-like image of two unrestful, unliving beings preparing food, to describe the blacksmith's bellows in the act of forging a sword.

Kennings which in context become extended metaphors (*nýgjǫrvingar* in the sense Snorri uses it in *Háttatál*[15]) do the same thing:

> *Sviðr lætr sóknar naðra*
> *slíðrbraut jǫfurr skríða*

> The wise prince makes adders of battle [swords] slide along the scabbard-road [sheath].
> (Snorri Sturluson, Háttatal, 6/1–2; ed. and trans. Gade 2017c, S. 1110)

This example is slightly more complex than the riddle since it involves two kennings, but structurally it involves the same components:

	Unknown subject	performs a congruent action	on an unknown but congruent object
Riddle 9	Two unquiet things, without breath	cooked	a leek of wounds
Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, 6	Adders of battle	slide	along the scabbard-road

In the riddle, the kenning *laukr sára*, which as we have seen fits into a common pattern, must be resolved to work out the riddle referent, 'bellows'. In *Háttatál*, Snorri explains that the kenning *slíðrbraut* 'scabbard-road' is newly created from extending the common kenning *naðra sóknar* 'adders of battle' (ed. Faulkes 2007, S. 7). Hence in *nýgjǫrvingar* kennings are not always to be 'kenned', or recognised from knowing the pattern, but guessed through riddling techniques. *Nýgjǫrvingar* might especially fit the rhetorical literature's criterion that *aenigmata*/*gátur* should reveal 'a hidden similarity of things', because not only do the initial kennings themselves reveal such a likeness – between adders and swords, for example – but extending them reveals a new hidden likeness, such as between sheaths and roads.

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15 On the conflicting definitions of the term *nýgjǫrving* see Marold (1993; 2012).

Nomen agentis kennings

It is not just metaphorical kennings that are potentially able to translate well to riddles, or vice versa. A number of descriptions found in riddles seem particularly close to *nomen agentis* kennings. These may move away from the rhetorical figure *aenigma* and its hidden similarities, but they are certainly not outside the usage of the Old Norse word *gáta*. Riddle 1, 'ale', arguably strings together such kennings (Meissner allows these into his corpus); according to the riddle, ale is (ll. 4–6):

> *ýða lemill,*   *orða tefill,*
>   *ok orða upphefill.*

> crippler of people, hinderer of words, and instigator of words. (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017b, S. 410)

Although the most common kenning patterns for alcoholic drink have basewords involving large natural bodies of water and determinants often involving small drinking vessels, the riddle's descriptors have conceptual correspondences with known kennings in the corpus. In *Háttatal* 25/5 Snorri describes mead as *heilsu máls* 'the cure of speech' (ed. and trans. Gade 2017c, S. 1131), and elaborates on the concept, 'solving' the kenning, in an example of a *tilsagt* or annotated stanza:

> *Máls kann mildingr heilsu*
> *— mjǫðr heitir svá — veita*

> The generous one provides the cure of speech [MEAD]; mead is called thus. (*ibid.*)

In the same stanza he describes wine as *galli strúgs* 'the destruction of dignity' (*ibid.*). Like Sturla Þórðarson's *heilivágr allra stríða* 'soothing balm of all torments' (*Hákonarkviða* 28/6–7; ed. and trans. Gade 2009d, S. 720), these are not *nomen agentis kennings*, but do work on the understanding of drink's effects on people, as does the riddle.

Riddle 1's listing technique might also be compared to kennings that appear in the context of other kennings for the same item, as in *Bjarkamál* 4 which, though ostensibly from an older poem, is extant only in *Skáldskaparmál* and the *Laufás Edda*:

> *Gramr inn gjǫflasti*   *gæddi hirð sína*
> *Fenju forverki,*   *Fáfnis miðgarði,*
> *Glasis glóbarri,*   *Grana fagrbyrði,*
> *Draupnis dýrsveita,*   *dúni Grafvitnis.*

> The most munificent prince enriched his retinue with Fenja's <giantess's> toil [GOLD], Fáfnir's <dragon's> land [GOLD], Glasir's <grove's> glowing foliage [GOLD], Grani's <horse's> fair burden [GOLD], Draupnir's <mythical ring's> precious sweat [GOLD], Grafvitnir's <snake's> feather bed [GOLD]. (ed. and trans. Clunies Ross 2017a, S. 500)

A *lausavísa* by the lawspeaker Markús Skeggjason (d. 1107), to give one example, combines the 'extended metaphor' type of riddling with the 'different ways of describing the same thing' type of riddling. This stanza is also preserved in poetical treatises: *Skáldskaparmál*, *Laufás Edda* and the *Third Grammatical Treatise*:

> *Fjarðlinna óð fannir*   *Bjǫrn gekk framm á fornar*
> *fast vetrliði rastar;*   *flóðs hafskíða slóðir;*
> *hljóp of húna gnípur*   *skúrǫrðigr braut skorðu*
> *hvalranns íugtanni.*   *skers glymfjǫtur bersi.*

> The winter-survivor <bear> of the maelstrom [SHIP] waded steadily through the snowdrifts of fjord-snakes [FISH > WAVES]; the greedy-toothed one <bear> of the whale-house [SEA > SHIP] leapt across crags of mastheads [WAVES]. The bear of the flood [SHIP] went forward on the old tracks of ocean-skis [SHIPS > WAVES]; the storm-battling little bear of the prop [SHIP] broke the resounding fetter of the skerry [SEA]. (ed. and trans. Gade 2017b, S. 296)

In these examples, resolving or knowing any one kenning gives a fairly good clue as to the others, as, arguably, is the case with any one line of the ale-riddle. In any case each stand-alone descriptor works to confirm the others (cf. Lombardi 2017, S. 244). One perhaps does not have to 'know the answer' in all cases, then, even when the *Bjarkamál* stanza in particular seems to require a great deal of mythological knowledge. These stanzas showcase the skill of the skald but they also show up some of the workings of skaldic language, whether allusions to mythology or of the workings of variation in kenning patterns. It is no coincidence they are both included in Snorri's expressly explicatory *Edda*, their original contexts lost or spurious. Yet while in both stanzas riddling techniques potentially act as built-in tools allowing access to skaldic language, they are far from simple or unlearned. Roberta Frank (1978, S. 76) states explicitly that 'Markús' stanza illustrates what could have happened when a Norse poet who had acquired the clerical skill of writing and a love of Virgilian hexameters pressed these into the service of a traditional poetics'. Frank's sensitive analysis also demonstrates that merely understanding the kenning referents is not the same as appreciating the poetry: she unfolds the multiple layers of the stanza to show how the metaphor progresses from a young cub through to a 'grizzled old bear', while the nature of the sea-descriptions suggest a journey from an Icelandic fjord to the west coast of Norway (*ibid.*, S. 47–48).

Paradox

As with Markus' *lausavísa*, in Riddle 1, working out each of the short descriptors for ale is not the same as appreciating the riddle as a whole. The kennings in Markus' stanza confirm and develop an image; the descriptors in Riddle 1 create a paradox. Ale hinders words *but* also instigates them, presumably depending on the stage of the drinker's intoxication. Around one third of the riddles in the *Hervarar saga* corpus work by setting up one description only to seemingly contradict it in the next. The referent is to be found by resolving the paradox and recognising where the descriptions in fact overlap or work together. The opposition in Riddle 20, for example, is necessary to make the riddle work:

> *Hverjar eru þær leikur,   er líða lönd yfir*
> *   at forvitni föður?*
> *Hvítan skjöld   þær um vetr bera,*
> *   en svartan um sumar.*

> Who are those playmates, who move over lands to the curiosity of their father? They bear a white shield in winter, but a black one in summer. (ed. and trans. Burrows 2017b, S. 432)

Recognition of the referent, ptarmigans, depends on having the information that the 'playmates' in question have both white 'shields' in winter and dark ones in summer, referring to the ptarmigan's seasonally-changing plumage. It also – albeit in a somewhat comical comparison between the mythological shield-maiden and the (often rather plump and fluffy) ptarmigan – points up the wonder of the birds' ability to transform its appearance and to camouflage according to the time of year.

Kennings often draw upon oppositions and incongruities to create paradoxical images – for instance, gold as 'fire of the water'. However, they cannot independently, as a two-part unit, present two contradictory versions of the same thing. (This is another reason to account for the lack of conceptual correspondences between the Old Norse riddle corpus and kenning corpus discussed earlier: kennings simply have less space in which to describe their referent, recalling Lindow's observation that 'the riddle is a complete structural entity, the kenning a rhetorical device found in certain kinds of poetry' (1975, S. 312)). In context, however, paradoxes like those in the riddles can be developed from kennings. The so-called *nykrat* device, where different metaphorical kennings for the same referent are used within one stanza, could be said to cause a kind of paradox.[16] Consider

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again the *Bjarkamal* stanza cited above: gold is, at one and the same time, the toil of Fenja, the land of Fáfnir, the foliage of Glasir, the burden of Grani, the sweat of Draupnir, and the feather bed of Grafvitnir – and, also at the same time, itself, gold, a precious metal. The 'riddle' of the stanza as a whole asks what it is that can be all these things at once, and the paradox is resolved by appreciating that in fact, wondrously, gold can.

Nygjǫrving, often considered to be the opposite of *nykrat*, can also create paradox, as in the fourth anonymous stanza in the *Fourth Grammatical Treatise*:

> *Leygs svelgr, en etr eigi,*
> *íugtanni lið manna;*
> *ganga menn ór munni*
> *margreftum fletvargi.*

> The bear of the [hearth-]flame [HOUSE] swallows, but does not eat, the band of men; men issue from the mouth of the many-raftered bench-wolf [HOUSE]. (ed. and trans. Clunies Ross and Wellendorf 2014, S. 4–5)

The stanza exemplifies the figure *bethgraphia*, which is not attested elsewhere (*ibid.*, S. xxxv, xxxix, 58). The stanza may also have been invented by the author of the treatise, using a known pattern of animals as base-words in other house-kennings (Meissner 1921 §101 c). Interestingly, the stanza is somewhat reminiscent of Donatus' *mater me genuit* ice-water riddle, in its suggestion of a change of state and a return to the original (men are outside, inside, and then again outside a house). The bear metaphor is extended, in a *nýgjǫrving* construction, to congruent actions in the verbs *svelga* and *eta*, and the concept is extended again into the second clause through mouth-imagery (though the animal base-word changes from bear to wolf in the second kenning). Paradoxes are raised in that the bear *svelgr*, *en etr eigi*, and that the men are swallowed but emerge from a mouth. All in all, this stanza looks like an accomplished riddle, or enigma – by someone well educated in rhetorical theory.

The stanzas by Einarr Skúlason that are preserved in *Skáldskaparmál* and have been grouped in modern times into a poem known as *Øxarflokkr* play with many of the devices discussed so far. Einarr was a twelfth-century priest, *stallari* (marshal) and court poet, probably of the Mýrar family of Borg in western Iceland (Gade 2009a): another educated poet whose work was appreciated in a learned milieu. The stanzas apparently describe an axe given to Einarr as a gift, though Gade (2017b, S. 140) cautions that the stanzas may not all refer to the same weapon or originally belong to the same poem. Take st. 8:

> *Dœgr þrymr hvert, en hjarta*　　　*Aldri má fyr eldi*
> *hlýrskildir ræðr mildu*　　　　　*áls hrynbrautar skála*
> *Heita blakks, of hvítum*　　　　　*— ǫll viðr folka fellir*
> *hafleygr digulskafli.*　　　　　　*framræði — snæ bræða.*

Every day the sea-flame [GOLD] rests on the white crucible-snowdrift [SILVER], and the shield-provider of the prow of Heiti's <sea-king's> horse [(lit. 'prow-shield-provider of Heiti's horse') SHIP > SEA-WARRIOR] has a generous heart. Never can snow of scales [SILVER] be melted by fire of the eel's resounding road [SEA > GOLD]; the feller of armies [WARRIOR] performs all glorious deeds. (ed. and trans. Gade 2017a, S. 148)

The two kennings for gold are congruent with each other, as are the two kennings for silver, but in combination they appear to portray an impossible scenario: flame lies on snow. How can it be that snow can never be melted by fire? Because the 'fire' is gold, and the 'snow' is silver, and silver is not melted by gold – but the riddling scenario posed by Einarr has brought a new appreciation of wonder to an axe-handle decorated with inlaid precious metals.

Conclusions

Although Marold suggests that it is the 'context-independent kenning … that … poses riddles that yield pleasure and rational satisfaction when solved' (2012, S. lxxxiii), it is when kennings are appreciated in their context that comparison is particularly apt, and the most direct comparisons with actual Old Norse *gátur* are yielded. Both Old Norse riddles and kennings amply demonstrate the way familiar material may be reshaped to provide new ways of looking at the world, to prove the poet's skill, and showcase the sheer exuberance that comes from poetic word play.

In the *Hervarar saga* riddle corpus, there is little overlap with kenning referents and conceptualisations, and with common kenning patterns least of all. Nonetheless, some of the *Hervarar saga* riddles suggest a degree of familiarity with the concepts, language and techniques of skaldic kennings. By the time the *Hervarar saga* riddles were compiled as part of the saga in the early thirteenth century, it is no longer meaningful to speak of a divide such as Lindow draws between the skaldic-poetry-knowing *drótt* and everyone else. The rich corpus of skaldic poetry from the *Íslendingasögur* suggests that the 'community of knowers' in thirteenth-century Iceland could have been a large one. Moreover, as Frederick Tupper argued in 1903, and many others have pointed out since, separating popular and learned elements in riddles is often not easy, and perhaps not desirable. Material passes from one sphere to another, to be played with and reworked in new ways.

In light of Guðrún Nordal's (2001) evidence that skaldic poetry may have been used as instructional material in the teaching of *grammatica* from the twelfth century, these echoes may represent a transfer of and play with poetic material. The collection as a whole, taken in light of kennings in context, hints at experimentation or play in concocting riddles: those developed around kennings or from concepts found in them; the multiplicity of descriptions for waves among the four riddles with that referent;[17] the fact that there appear to be multiple solutions for at least some of the riddles;[18] borrowings or parallels with riddles widely-known from other cultures; and, though there is not space to explore it here, the many echoes of other eddic poetry.[19]

Many factors seem to suggest that the Old Norse *gátur* do not depend on knowing the answer. As the riddles stand in *Hervarar saga* there is far less suggestion of rote learning of answers than of working them out: the evidence comes from the 'clues' and riddling strategies I have highlighted in this paper; from the moment in the saga prose in which Heiðrekr offers his court the chance to solve a riddle; from the fact that the solutions are in prose; and because the solutions appear differently in different redactions. Skaldic kennings also do not depend on knowing the answer per se, but on knowing the tools with which to arrive at the answer. Many of the kennings in context that I have identified here, which employ riddling techniques that can be compared directly to the Old Norse *gátur*, often throw these tools – set kenning patterns, for instance – into relief. They force the audience to go beyond merely knowing the answer, reanimating kennings, calling attention to metaphors, and showcasing variation. Interestingly, many of these examples are either composed by members of literary circles of the twelfth or first half of the thirteenth century, and/or are earlier, but found homes in thirteenth-century poetical treatises – broadly the same time as the *Hervarar saga* collection was written down. These instances, too, highlight a vital interest in poetic play almost for its own sake, in testing the possibilities of skaldic language and in riddling – and rhetorical – techniques. They reflect what seems to be a collective, cultural habit of mind that sees the world according to the language of poetry, and delights in it.

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17 The variation between these riddles is explored in detail in Burrows (2013).

18 The understanding that a question might have multiple answers and is open to new variations adds to the sense of entertainment and play; cf., for instance, the English riddle-joke 'What's black and white and red all over?'.

19 Such echoes are highlighted in Burrows (2017b).

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