

¶ Stephen N. Tranter. *Clavis Metrica: Háttatal, Háttalykill and the Irish Metrical Tracts*. [Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie 25] Basel and Frankfurt a.M.: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1997. 228 Pp. ISBN 3-7190-1522-X

In his monograph *Clavis Metrica* Stephen Tranter compares two different metrical systems that were prevalent in medieval Ireland and Scandinavia. Focusing on the earliest metrical treatises in each culture, the author compares the various metrical forms recorded in them, places them into their individual cultural contexts and reconstructs two distinct metrical histories. The comprehensiveness of Tranter's comparative analysis makes it a valuable contribution to the field of comparative metrics, while, at the same time, remaining accessible to scholars and students of

Old Norse and early Irish language and literature. Tranter's exposition of the subject matter is always clear: subject-specific terminology is explained whenever necessary, and helpful summaries are given at the end of each chapter. In particular the recapitulatory summaries at the end of the whole study enable the reader to look up information concerning specific topics in Old Icelandic and medieval Irish metrics, topics which then can be further investigated in the other works mentioned by Tranter throughout his work.

The two introductory chapters of *Clavis Metrica* lay the groundwork for the study. Tranter points out that Earl Rögnvaldr's *Háttalykill* (12<sup>th</sup> century) and Snorri Sturluson's *Háttatal* (13<sup>th</sup> century), on the one hand, and Cellach Hua Ruanada's *Dagaisti* (11<sup>th</sup> century) and the first three Irish metrical tracts (10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> century), on the other, describe two poetical systems that resemble each other only superficially. Although syllabicity, alliteration and rhyme are prominent features in both Irish and skaldic verse, their nature and function in each poetic tradition are determined by culture-dependent factors. The early conversion of Ireland to Christianity and the introduction of the written word induced Irish poets and metricists to assimilate the principles of metrical analysis used in Western Latinity. Scandinavian skaldic verse was, however, an already established literary tradition at the time of the introduction of Christianity in 10<sup>th</sup> century Norway and Iceland and continued to be influenced by native oral forms after the conversion. According to Tranter, the presence of a writing-based set of poetic conventions, complete with an organized classification system, even stimulated the regulation of the poet's liberties. Both Irish poet (*fili* and bard) and Icelandic skald enjoyed a prestigious position at their patron's court, yet only the Irish poet's composition had to correspond to his given status in a strictly hierachal order of poets.

Since stanzaic-syllabic verse fully or partially replaced a native oral alliterative metrical system in both cultures, the question arises how such a change was motivated. In respect to Irish verse, Tranter rejects Calvert Watkins' theory of an inherent Indo-European iso-syllabic system but favours the standard approach that postulates the influence of Latin hymnody on Irish poetic composition. However, Tranter is less certain

when discussing the various explanations for the rise of iso-syllabic verse in Scandinavia. Although agreeing that the loss of inflectional endings and the resulting shortening of the long line facilitated strict line control and the introduction of internal tonic syllable rhyme in skaldic verse, he argues that such linguistic changes do not provide the basis for a compelling argument. Tranter instead accepts an explanation that postulates cultural borrowing from the Irish metrical system or Latin hymnody although his view greatly differs from the conventional argument. In his discussion of the origin of the skaldic *dróttkvætt* he points out that such a borrowing could only have been transmitted orally. Consequently, the reconstruction of any details in the history of skaldic form is impossible.

Whatever the origins of skaldic verse may have been, its practitioners did not copy the use of alliteration, rhyme and iso-syllabicity from their Irish colleagues. Influenced by their native oral poetic heritage, they continued to use alliteration modeled on the Germanic *Langzeile*. Rhyme was added but was internal and tonic, thus retaining an aural quality. The same poets even allowed an occasional irregular syllable count, which Snorri can only explain by referring to acoustically defined regulations (e.g. the use of *bragarmál* 'poetic speech' and the occurrence of long and short syllables). In fact, the enormous pressures imposed on him by his native poetic heritage forced Snorri to compromise Latin classification models throughout his *Háttatal*. Not only is he unable to apply Isidore of Seville's abstract principles of binary division, repeated subdivisions and organization by significant numbers to skaldic metrics in any consistent manner, but he also includes alliteration, tonic rhyme and other speech-related characteristics, thus confirming the status of these inherited oral features within the new superimposed classification system.

The composition and classification of Irish verse, on the other hand, adapted well to the demands of the new metrical system introduced with Christianity. The syllable, taken over from the grammars of late Antiquity, soon became the main classification feature for both poets and tractarians. Full end rhyme was also introduced which, with the loss of inflectional endings, turned into consonant-class rhyme. In the cases

of alliteration and accent in Irish poetry, Tranter distinguishes between poetic practice and classification. Although both features occur regularly in all Irish verse forms except for the “clerical” metres *deibide* and *rannaigecht*, these poetic features are not mentioned in metrical tracts because Latin grammarians did not discuss them. Finally, the Irish metrists totally adapted Isidore’s principles to their own poetry and created a socially regulated, hierachal classification system of metres.

Tranter sums up the main points of his analysis in his conclusion and then postulates two different metrical histories for the two poetic corpora. In medieval Ireland, stanzaic-syllabic verse developed along two channels, which Tranter cautiously calls “lay” and “clerical.” Tranter claims that even the lay poets, although trained in the vernacular tradition of oral alliterative poetry, eventually used the new syllabic verse, which gained increasing prestige. Both kinds of composition were influenced by writing-based principles and both were subject to written analysis developed directly from Latin models. Icelandic stanzaic-syllabic verse, in contrast with Irish versification, remained more faithful to its oral ancestor, the alliterative long line. Skaldic poetry took its shape not from the influence of writing based principles but from a “more indefinite source of stimulus for change, one which must have been the product of oral transmission” (p.202), and which Tranter credits to the Scandinavians’ mobility in the Viking Age.

As Tranter acknowledges, his two “models of evolution” only constitute a simplifying survey of factors and processes that contributed to the transition from alliterative to stanzaic-syllabic verse in Ireland and Scandinavia. Tranter’s main hypothesis that writing-based Western Latinity affected the transition much more in medieval Ireland than in medieval Scandinavia is hard to refute, yet some of his evidence has to be contested. It is rash to postulate that stanzaic division, syllable count and cadence in early skaldic verse were transmitted orally because they are generally assumed to have been first used before the conversions of Norway and Iceland. Even if we accept the traditional dating of the early poetry containing these features, we do not know if the skalds had not been exposed to Christianity and writing before the official dates of conversion. And if the skalds were exposed to writing, why could not

writing-based principles have affected skaldic form? Although Tranter admits that the origins of the strictly regulated *dróttkvætt* already used by Bragi Boddason and Þjóðolfr of Hvinir cannot be traced any longer, he is certain that the transmission of the external knowledge was oral.

A related vexed issue that Tranter and every other scholar of skaldic verse must face is the dating and transmission of skaldic poetry. Since all skaldic poetry has come down us in post-conversion manuscripts, we cannot be certain how much the original poems have been altered. This problem, which equally applies to Irish verse, is a sticking point in Tranter's argument. If early skaldic poems were revised or even rewritten by a later author, such a process would explain the influence of classical models on this poetry. Still, the possibility that the poems are not authentic, undermines any assertions about their metrical makeup. If the *Ragnarsdrápa* was not composed by a 9<sup>th</sup> century poet called Bragi Boddason, and if some later writer tempered with Þjóðolfr's *Haukslong*, we are left with no reliable poetic specimen on the basis of which we can confirm or reject the possibility that pre-conversion verse was unaffected by writing-based principles.

Tranter's *Clavis metrica* is certainly not the last word on the subject of Irish and Icelandic metrics. It therefore fittingly ends with a set of questions that only have been touched upon in the analysis and have to be answered more fully in future studies. For the time being, however, *Clavis metrica* is an informative and highly accessible book that stimulates those interested in comparative medieval metrics.

*Karin Olsen*, University of Groningen

¶ Julian Meldon D'Arcy. *Scottish Skalds and Sagamen: Old Norse Influence on Modern Scottish Literature*. East Linton, Scotland: The Tuckwell Press, 1996. 311 pp. ISBN 1 898410 25 9. £14.99.

To the reader who has a background in Norse, twentieth-century Scottish