Golden Words

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ABSTRACT: No one shows much surprise at the many kennings referring to poetry and the mead of poetry that are found in the Old Norse corpus of poetry. There is, however, another group of rather puzzling kennings, which seem to have been taken mainly at face value, although they are based on a rather strange notion. These are the many kennings that refer to gold as the speech and/or sound of the jötnar. In this article, I present the idea that these gold-kennings are strongly associated with the idea of poetry as the highest, most precious, form of speech.

RESUME: Ingen viser megen overraskelse over de mange kenninger som henviser til digtning og digtermådet som findes i det norrøne digt-korpus. Men der findes en anden gruppe ret gårdefulde kenninger, som synes hovedsageligt at være blevet taget bogstaveligt, skønt de er baseret på en temmelig sær idé. Det er de mange kenninger som henviser til guld som jætternes tale og/eller lyd. I dette bidrag fremfører jeg den idé at disse guld-kenninger er meget tæt forbundet med ideen om digtekunst som den højeste og mest dyrebare form for tale.

KEYWORDS: Skaldic poetry; kennings for gold and poetry; jötnar; Snorri.

In this article, I will present the idea that the many kennings that refer to gold as the speech, sound, or song of the jötnar actually spring from the idea of poetry as the highest, most treasured, form of speech. When looking at the jötnar in the Old Norse sources, one of the things that draws attention is their close connection to gold; most of them seem to possess it in abundance. In Eddic poetry, we see in Hávamál that Sutturgr’s hall is equipped with a golden chair, in Prymiskviða, Þrymr decorates his dogs with gold ribbons and he owns cattle with gold-plated horns, according to Skírnismál, there is no lack of gold in Gymisgarðar, Lokasenna says that Gýmir’s daughter was „gulli keypt“; finally in Hymiskviða we are told that Hymir’s consort walks into the hall „algullin“, something which may just as well mean that she is bedecked with golden jewellery as that the word is a synonym with her other descriptive adjective „brúnhvít“ which designates fairness of complexion. Finally, in Grottasöngr, the
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**jǫttun**-women Fenja and Menja grind gold in huge quantities. Together with such direct mentions of gold in the possession of jǫtnar, all of these cases, except for Grottaspøngr, yield further indications of great riches owned by jǫtnar, such as large herds of cattle, great halls, leisure time and big banquets. This, however, may not be the whole story.¹

Looking to the skaldic poetry, a large number of the references that connote the link between jǫtnar and gold consists of a special group of somewhat perplexing kennings.² These are the many kennings that refer to gold as the words, speech, sound or song of jǫtnar. This rather strange metaphor of gold as a form of speech has been widely noted in scholarly discussion, but mostly, it has been accepted without much probing, for example, into the kind of imagery or conception that might lie behind this unlikely mental picture.³ As far as I know, this imagery has not been discussed in any detail by earlier scholars. Even so, it seems to me to be worth a more detailed investigation.

These kennings, twenty-six in all, are constructed with a base word meaning speech, words, laughter or song – that is, they refer to a sound that comes out of the mouth – and a determinant which refers to a jǫttun, who is either named or otherwise designated:

| Kenning for Gold | Translation | Source |
|-----------------|-------------|--------|
| boð mellings    | words/message/order of the jǫttun - gold | Guðmundardrápa 15 (Árni ábóti Jónsson) |
| orð fjallgestils| word/s of the mountain king/ jǫttun - gold | Íslingendadrápa 4 |
| lója orð       | the words of Lóðr - gold | Anon (TGT) 5 |
| lója dómr      | opinion/advice of Lóðr - gold | Poem about Árón Hjörleifsson 2 (Pormóðr Ölfsson) |
| lója glysmöl   | the shining speech of Lóðr - gold | Bjarkamál in fornó 5 |
| lója mál       | the speech of Lóðr - gold | Kátrínardrápa 38 (Kálfr Hallsson) |
| lója rǫdd      | the speech of Lóðr - gold | Kátrínardrápa 39 (Kálfr Hallsson) |
| lója hlátr     | the laughter of Lóðr - gold | Lausavísa 3 (Ófeigr Skíðason) |
| lója niðleikr  | Lóðr’s brothers’ playful words - gold | Lausavísa 15 (Gísli Súrsson) |
| lója galdr     | the chant of Lóðr - gold | Lausavísa 11 (Skarphéðinn Njáls – Njáls saga) |
| jǫfra heiðar galdr | the chant of the chieftains of the heath - gold | Lausavísa 2 (Einarr Skúlason) |

¹ All references to Eddic poetry are to *Eddukvæði I, II*. (2014). Póður Ingi Guðjónsson, Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (eds.). Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag.

² All references to skaldic poetry are to *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages I–III*. (2009–2017). Editorial Board: Margaret Clunies Ross, Kari Ellen Gade, Guðrún Nordal, Edith Marold, Diana Whaley, and Tarrin Wills. Turnhout: Brepols; [https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=skaldic](https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/m.php?p=skaldic)

³ See, for example, Meissner 1921, p. 31; Turville Petre 1976, p. 1; Kuhn 1983, pp. 220–238; and Guðrún Nordal 2001, p. 330.

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As can be seen from this table, a very frequent kenning-model refers to gold as the “speech” or “word” or “sound” uttered by jǫtnar. Some of these kennings have galdr (magic – gala [sing a magic song]) as a base word, which may indicate that kennings of this kind contained or symbolized some form of numinous power and/or authority (possibly ritualistic or connected to rituals). The poems which contain these kennings cover a considerable period of time, ranging from the 10th century to the 14th, which seems to indicate that this concept must be quite old and well-established in the vocabulary of at least some of the skalds. Referring either to jǫtnar as a generic group or to individual, named jǫtunn-figures, these kennings suggest that these two concepts, gold and the speech of jǫtnar, were at some point in time regarded as compatible, even synonymous, in some special way. In all parts of the world, in all societies from the very earliest of times, gold has been seen as the most beautiful of metals and thus the most precious and valuable, and possession and ownership of it has always denoted high status and superiority, even divinity. Therefore, the equation of speech with gold could mean that the speech thus designated is considered to be of superior quality. Following on from that, ascribing this kind of superior speech to a particular generic
group must attribute a special status or role to that group of beings – especially since jǫtnar appear to be the only kind of creatures capable of making such precious utterances. No other type of being does it. The kennings hence suggest that the speech of jǫtnar was seen as something extremely precious and had something exclusive and much treasured about it.

The objective here is to try to identify what kind of speech or words are meant in these kennings. They are only used in skaldic poetry, and it seems not unlikely that in the mind of poets, who often composed and performed their art for kings and other high-standing persons and were frequently paid in gold or other valuables, poetry would be considered the highest and most admired or esteemed form of word-use. Of skaldic poetry Gabriel Turville-Petre says:

The author frequently celebrates an event, a glorious victory or heroic defeat and death. He may praise a prince or chieftain for his valour, and especially for his generosity, for many scalds lived on the generosity of chieftains ... They committed the triumphs of a chieftain to immortal memory; they might be commissioned to make a lay in his memory after he was dead.4

It may seem a banal question, but it is certainly relevant to ask why poets would make the effort to compose praise for kings and chiefs in a complex poetic form if that form were not considered of a higher quality and order than prose – and was rewarded accordingly. The obvious deduction is that even from very early times, poems or poetry were the golden speech and words in question. Over the course of time, this image may have lost its deeper meaning although poetry as such retained its status in the minds of men.

There may, however, be more aspects to consider. In a story Snorri relates in Skáldskaparmál, he says the following of the jötunn Ólvaldi and his three sons:

Hann var mjökk gullauði gr, en er hann dó ok synir hans skyldu skipta arfi, þá höfðu þeir mæling at gullinu er þeir skiptu at hverr skyldi taka munnfylli sína ok allir jafnmargar. Einn þeira var Þjazi, annarr Iði, þriði Gangr. En þat höfum vær orðtak nú með oss at kalla gullit munntal þessa jótna, en vær felum í rúnum eða í skáldskap svá at vær köllum þat mál eða orðta<ka>, tal þessa jótna.

He was very rich in gold, and when he died and his sons had to divide their inheritance, they measured out the gold when they divided it by each in turn taking a mouthful, all of them the same number. One of them was Thiassi, the second Idi, the third Gang. And we now have this expression among us, to call gold the mouth-tale of these giants, and we conceal it in secret language or in poetry by calling it speech or words or talk of these giants.5

There are several points of interest here. One is that, in Snorri’s mind, gold can apparently be equated with “the mouth-tale” of the jǫtnar. Another is that it is concealed in rúnir (secret language) or in poetry. The third is the name of the father, Ólvaldi.6

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4 Turville-Petre, 1976. p. xvi.
5 Skáldskaparmál, p. 3.
6 His name is Allvaldi in the manuscript of Codex Regius (Hárbarðsljóð 19) but Ólvaldi in Skáldskaparmál, of which the latter form is, according to the few scholars who have dealt with
Regarding the first point, we see that the names of the three brothers/sons of Ólvaldi are attested in the above listed gold-kennings in which gold is referred to as the “speech of jǫtnar.” Especially interesting in this context is the point that, when the sons are supposed to take their inheritance, they are to put their father’s gold into their mouths (“taka munnfylli”). This seems a strange way of dividing the father’s inheritance between them and, in light of the number of gold-kennings in which these three brothers are mentioned, eleven in all, with lōi featuring in more than half (see above), it is hard not to see some kind of connection here. As mentioned above, we know from the many attestations in both poetry and prose that jǫtnar in general are closely associated with gold, and just like Suttungr with the golden chair in his hall, Gymir in Skírnismál and Þrymr in Þrymskviða, Ólvaldi was certainly not lacking gold before his death, according to Snorri’s narrative. When his sons fill their mouths with gold, it equates what is in their mouths and what comes out of them, namely speech, with this most precious of metals and becomes a strong indication that the speech of the jǫtnar was at one time or other seen as being of the highest quality.

As to the second point, it seems that this gold-equated “mouth-tale” of the jǫtnar may have had some link to the secret language of the rúnir. This is suggested both in Snorri’s words quoted above, and, even more remarkably, in those of the above listed gold-kennings that refer to the speech of jǫtnar as galdr (magic; [gala: sing or chant magic songs]). This link cannot easily be ignored. Additionally, if we look closely at Snorri’s wording, things get even stranger, because gold can be referred to as being concealed in rúnir. Yet, if we look at this issue from another angle, that is, if we assume that the rúnir and/or poetry issued by the jǫtnar are as precious and highly esteemed as gold, the most treasured metal available, then the story makes perfectly good sense: The inheritance shared by the three brothers after their father’s death is the knowledge and skill of the highest form of speech: powerful magic incantations and poetry. This knowledge is not meant for everyone but only for a select group, in this context the jǫtnar, and only they can wield it. On the human level skaldic poetry may possibly be seen as an equivalent since it requires special knowledge and skill; it is highly wrought and crafted and the þættir and poets’ sagas make clear that kings appreciated that craftsmanship.

If we now move briefly from skaldic to Eddic poetry, stanza 140 in Hávamál comes to mind, in which Óðinn, after his ordeal of hanging on the vindga meiðr for nine nights, picks up “rúnar”, that is, he learns or receives runic knowledge, which in the next stanza he calls “fimbulljóð niðu” (variously translated as “nine mighty spells/songs/chants/charms”). The prefix fimbul- (mighty) is always used to denote the

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7 Uppsala-Edda, p. 201. It should be noted that, in the Uppsala-Edda, this figure is named Auðvaldi; but even if that form should be seen as more reliable than Ólvaldi, that does not cancel out the implication of wealth and power, but rather enhances it.
superlative, the ‘most’ or ‘highest’ of something,8 and more often than not it appears in connection with mystical and runic knowledge. In that stanza (Háv 141), it also becomes clear that Óðinn learns these apparently mighty charms or poems from the jöttnar, and that he receives the “drykk ins dýra mjðar” (a drink of the precious mead). This echoes the earlier events in Suttungr’s homestead (Háv 104-5), where he also received “drykk ins dýra mjðar” after he had recited mörgr orð (many words), supposedly to prove his prowess in one way or another.10 What we have in this cluster of images is runic magic, mighty poetry, and recitation, all intertwined with one another and all taking place on premises belonging to jöttnar.

Turning now to the third point, the name of the father of the three brothers: Ólvaldi. It indicates someone who wields power over ḡl (ale/mead)11 and leaves no doubt that it is in his hands to bestow it; this is compatible with what we know about many other jöttnar who in various Eddic poems are seen to host feasts for the æsir, as well as being designated as the keepers of mead (see list of kennings below). We may assume that the lord who owns a hall has power over his resources and that the mead served in his hall is one such asset. Such ruling figures exist among the jöttnar, for instance Suttungr in Hávamál 104-110 and, apparently, the unnamed character in Hávamál 140 (inn frægi sonr Boðþórs, Bestlu faðir [the famous son of Bolthor, Bestla’s father]) who seems to have a status comparable to Suttungr’s; also the wealthy Brymr in Brymskviða, Gymir in Skírnismál and Hymir in Hymiskviða; and most likely also Ægir in Lokasenna. In most of these cases, the mead that features even seems to carry ritualistic connotations and is generally referred to as “dýr mjðr” (precious mead) or “forn mjðr” (ancient mead). It is served by jötunn-women in a glass or cup called kálkr or hrímkálkr, apparently a formal object of some kind which is most likely used on formal occasions or in rituals.12

As the abundantly rich father of the three sons in Snorri’s narrative, and as is indicated in the many gold-kennings listed above, it may be assumed that Ólvaldi falls into the same category as these other jöttnar: he is the lord of his own hall. As we know, all the feasts mentioned in the poetic sources are held by jöttnar and other occasions where mead is served such as in Skírnismál 37 also take place at the jöttnar premises. While it may be disputable whether all the above-mentioned references to mead should be seen

8 Cf. fimbulvetr: “the great and awful winter preceding the end of the world” (Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874/1957, p. 153; see also, de Vries 1962, p. 121); and more appositely fimbulþulr in Hávamál 142.
9 This formula „drykkr ins dýra/forna mjðar” occurs in Hávamál (105 and 140), but also in other contexts (Skírnismál 37; Hymiskviða 8, 30-32; and Lokasenna 53).
10 See Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, pp. 76–83.
11 The words ḡl and mjðr seem to be metonymic of one another and their choice in the sources mainly seems to depend on rhythm and alliteration.
12 Gunnløð serves the dýr mjðr in Hávamál 105; Gerðr and Sif serve the forn mjðr in Skírnismál 37 and Lokasenna 53. As regards Sif, it has been suggested that she may be of jötunn-origin, see Mundal 1990, pp. 5-18; also Simek 1984, pp. 216-217; and Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, p. 115 n. In both Brymskviða and Hymiskviða, a jötunn-woman is present; in Hymiskviða even also a kálkr of magic power.
as relating specifically to the poetic mead\textsuperscript{13} the many skaldic kennings that do refer to the poetic mead leave no doubt about this drink being in the possession or keeping of jötunn, as can be seen from the following list:

| Kennings for Poetry\textsuperscript{14} | Translation | Source |
|----------------------------------------|-------------|--------|
| brunnr Aurnis                          | Aurnir’s well - poetry | Hallmundarkviða 12 (Bergbúa þátr) |
| Billings burar full                    | the drink of Billingr’s son - poetry | Poem about a woman 2 (Ormr Steinþórsson) |
| Gauta gildi                            | the Gautar’s (giants’) drink - poetry | Lausavísa 46 (Kormákr Qgmunarsön) |
| gildi grjótálðr                       | the giants’ drink - poetry | Poem about Porsteinn 1 (Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson) |
| gjöld Gillingr                         | Gillingr’s payment - poetry | Háleygiatal 1 (Eyvindr Finnsson) |
| Hrauðnis gjöld                         | Hrauðnir’s payment - poetry | Hákonardrápa 5 (Tindr Hallkelsón) |
| hornstraumr Hrímnis                    | The stream in Hrímnir’s horn - poetry | Poem about Porr 1 (Eysteinn Valda-son) |
| sættir Áms ok Austra                  | Ámr’s and Austri’s settlement/agreement - poetry | Lausavísa 5 (Ófeigr Skjóðason) |
| Surts ættar sylgr                      | the drink of Surtr’s kin - poetry | Erfridaþa Ólafs Tryggvasonar 15 (Hallfreðr Ólafsson) |
| drykkja Fjölnis fjalla                 | drink of Fjölnir of the mountains (giant) - poetry | Fragments 5 (Bragi inn gamli Boddason) |
| lió lýða landherðar                    | drink of giants - poetry | Erfridaþa Ólafs Tryggvasonar 21 (Hallfreðr Ólafsson) |
| fley berg-Saxa                         | drink of giants - poetry | Vellekla 2 (Einar skálaglamm Helgason) |
| bára berg-Mæra                         | drink of giants - poetry | Poem about Porsteinn 1 (Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson) |
| ramar veig salar Falsbrautar fannar    | Falr of the mountains’ (giant’s) drink - poetry | Poem about Gizurr gullbrárskáld 3 (Hofgarða-Refr Gestsson) |
| mýna jastRín aurgreppa Sýrar fentanna  | ale of giants - poetry | Sigrurardrápa 1 (Kormákr Qgmunarson) |
| possibly also: simblir sumbs           | giant of the ale/drink | Fragments 3 (Bragi inn gamli Boddason) |

\textsuperscript{13} Snorri’s interpretation of Hávamál 104-110, in which he relates that Óðinn stole the poetic mead from the jötunn, is the basis for many/most of the kennings that refer to the mead of poetry as Óðinn’s stolen prize. This interpretation has, however, been contested, especially by Roberta Frank and Svava Jakobsdóttir who both emphasize that there is nothing in the Hávamál episode that connects the „drykkr ins dýra mjóðar“ clearly to the mead of poetry, whereas it seems that some kind of sanctifying sacredness relating to rituals of one kind or another (see Frank 1981, pp. 155-170; Svava Jakobsdóttir 1988, pp. 215-245; an English translation of this article was published in The Poetic Edda: Essays on Old Norse Mythology, eds. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington, 2002, pp. 27-57. See also Ingunn Ásdísardóttir 2018, pp. 76-84.) It seems, however, more likely than not that, in the Hávamál-episode and Snorri’s interpretation, we may see the remnants of two older variants of a myth that has a precious drink of one kind or another at its core.

\textsuperscript{14} The unclear kenning “simblir sumbs” (the simblir of the drink), which is thought to denote jötunn, might possibly be added to this list, see Lexicon poeticum s.v.
Conclusion

Looking for a coherent explanation of this perplexing and seemingly illogical equation of speech/sound with gold, evident from the above-listed group of gold-kennings, the key is to be found in the determinants of the kennings, the jotnar and their chief attribute, gold and riches. From that standpoint it is my conclusion that this most treasured metal can be equated with that form of word-use which is regarded as the highest and most valuable form of speech, steeped in complexity and numinous knowledge and intended only for the select few. Poetry is, exactly as Snorri says, what is meant by this strange combination wherein gold represents the various sounds emitted through the mouth. The „munntal jotna“ is poetry and, on the mythological or runic and magical level, those who possess the knowledge and skill to perform it are the jotnar. When these three elements, gold, speech/sound and poetry, are connected in this way in the sources, the riddle of the gold-kennings resolves itself in a logical manner, showing that the jotnar are creatures who host and preside over feasts where numinous knowledge and poetic skills are prevalent. As skalds commit knowledge of historical events to the collective memory by putting it into memorable words, so jotnar possess this valuable knowledge which the æsir are so interested in getting a share of. The equation of poetry with gold on the human level, namely the fact that a skald should be paid for his art in gold, thus makes poetry and gold interchangeable, as the above-listed gold-kennings in question exhibit.

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