SKOTLANDS RÍMUR. ICELANDIC BALLADS ON THE GOWRIE CONSPIRACY. BY W. A. CRAIGIE, M.A., F.S.A. SCOT.

The above rímur are found only in one MS., that numbered "146 a, 8vo" of the Arna-Magnússan Collection in the University Library, Copenhagen. This manuscript, now in an unbound and defective condition, is a huge collection of such poems, containing somewhere about 25,000 lines in all, and belongs to the first half of the 17th century. It is in the small and beautiful hand of Jón Finnsson of Flatey, the island in Broadfirth from which Bishop Brynjólf obtained the famous Flatey-book. In its present state it has 434 pages, but some of these are blank; the rímur being written straight on like prose, the number of lines to a page averages from 50 to 70, according to metre.

Of the 24 sets of rímur contained in the MS., the one here dealt with is the eleventh, beginning on page 210. It was the heading Skotlands rímur in the printed catalogue (vol. ii. p. 411) that drew my attention to them. The Icelander Jón Sigurðsson, in the catalogue of rímur compiled by him, thought that they related to the Gunpowder Plot, from noticing that King James VI. was the hero, but on perusal it soon became evident that the subject of them was the Gowrie Conspiracy. Though it could not be expected that they would throw any fresh light on this event,—the author indeed was simply following the Latin account published under royal sanction,—it was interesting to find an Icelandic priest putting the story into verse so soon after its occurrence, the date of the rímur being probably about 1610.

From the middle of the 14th century down to the present day rímur have been the favourite popular poetry of Iceland. While they may be described as ballads, they differ from those of other countries in the greater exactness of the metre (alliteration being strictly observed, and combined with rhymes which are often very complex), in the use of kennings or circumlocutions after the style of the old Skaldic verse, and

1 Ruvenorum Conjuratio, 1601.
in the way in which they are connected in cycles. The oldest rímur, indeed, are single poems, but as a rule the story is told in several, which are nearly always in different metres: thus a modern poet, Benedikt Gröndal, has lately published Gaungu-Hrólf’s rímur, 48 in number.

“Skotlands rímur” are six in all; and although some leaves are wanting after page 236 of the MS., it seems that only one line and a word has been lost. The total number of lines is thus 1762; the lengths of the individual rímur will be given below. The title is perhaps not original, as the heading in the MS. is simply

Rímr sem Síðra Einar Gudmundz
Son hefur orðt

i.e., “Ballads, which Sir (= Reverend) Einar Gudmundsson has composed,” and in the last verse (vi. 42) the story is called Skotta þáttur.

According to the usual practice, each ríma is preceded by some introductory verses, which, being originally addressed by the poet to his lady-love, are technically known as the mansöngr, or “love-song.” In many cases the original idea has quite disappeared from the mansöngr, but a conventional trace is retained in some slight mention of a fair one to whom the ríma is supposed to be addressed. To this class belong Sir Einar’s, which are properly didactic moralisings, and lay special stress on the necessity of giving due respect to the clergy.

The rímur themselves, with their respective introductions, run as follows:—

I. Mansöngr of 30 verses: “Once I read a story which a doughty master had written in clever words. He tells of Scotland and its mighty King, and how two brothers plotted against him. Their attempt did not succeed, for the hand of the Lord protected him. Their fate is a warning to all who seek to deal falsely, for the traitor always comes to shame, and yet he goes on blindly. Ill begun is always ill ended. This is shown by the fates of Julian the Apostate, killed by an arrow from heaven; Nero, whose own dogs tore him to death; Antiochus and Herod; Cyrus, who fell by a woman; the accusers of Daniel, whom the lions devoured. So must all other false men perish: the same God will visit the same sin with the same punishment, but it would be too long
to reckon up all the instances. My dull examples grow tedious to the
dear maid, so I shall pour out the wine of song and go on with my
story."

The réma proper then tells in 72 verses how there was a King Jacop
in Scotland, who had a queen named Anna, daughter of the King of
Denmark. One time he went round his kingdom and came to Falka-
land. While at the chase one day he is met by Alexander, brother of
the Earl of Goiver, who tells him the story of finding the strange man
with the gold. The King refuses to have anything to do with it, and
rides after the chase.

The metre is simple, as may be seen from verse 35:

Alexand hjét sá öfta grér,
itran kvaddi stilli,
Greifans bróñir af Góivér,
gótt var þeirra í milli.

II. Headed Önnur skotsk. Mansöngr of 28 verses:—"Young folks
ought to give heed to the matter of this poem, and not mind the metre
of it. From youth upwards fear God and love knowledge; rise early;
give no heed to spae-wives, who only want to get money. Practise good
conduct and industrious habits. Be content with your own position in
life. Saul and Usias lost their kingdom for interfering with religious
matters. Never wish for any man to be disgraced. Arius tried to
bring Athanasius into disrepute, but utterly failed. Such practices are
common; men falsely accuse others, but Achitofel's ill counsels do not
always succeed; the Lord can confound them, and envious men are paid
back with full measure. This is proved by our story, if I can only get
on with it."

Alexander sends his servant Audries to his brother to tell him that
he may expect the King. The King finally decides to ride to Perth
(Johannis Stadur, i. 36), accompanied by the Earl of Mar (Greifi af
Mayr) and sixteen others, of whom Lennox is referred to, but not by
name. Alexander tries to persuade him to dismiss these, without success;
the King asks Lennox what his opinion of Alexander is. At Perth the
Earl comes to meet the King, and leads him to his hall. (66 verses.)

The metre is one of three lines: verse 3 is—
III. *Mansöngr* of 17 verses: "Though the ring-decked maid might wish for a love-song, I have but little poetry from Odin. But a little scent of the fruit of song he gave me once: I have no need to be grateful for his generosity. Let those rejoice who have been more successful. Friendship is not shown to every man, and I was never good at winning favour with the great. True friendship is rare over all the land; most men look for some advantage, and are envious of all others who get wealth or fame. Seek not, then, to be praised by the world: disgrace and loss may follow. He that sees in secret will reward you, and He will come one day to sit in judgment. May I be able to see Him with joy, though my works are not so good as they might be. I have not the *Mansöngs* art to speak about the fair maid, but I must try to give her the third ballad now."

The entertainment of the King and his followers is then described. After dinner Alexander leads off the King by himself through four apartments, locking each door behind him: in a small room they find an armed man. Alexander threatens the King, who is defenceless, but Christ protects him, and Alexander lays aside his weapon. The King makes a long speech, promising him pardon for his attempt. (72 verses.)

The metre is difficult: verse 17 is—

\[
\text{Mér er eft \textit{lent} 1 sá mansöngs \textit{mennt}} \\
\text{að meita um sprunndið ljósa,} \\
\text{þriðja hatt fyrir þorna gitt} \\
\text{þó mun eg verða að glóa.}
\]

IV. "The last ballad left the King in a strait: now we shall begin a new one." (3 verses.)

Alexander goes off to fetch his brother, after making the King promise to keep quiet. The armed man swears that he will do him no harm. Meanwhile the company have missed the King, and are told that he has ridden off, but the porter denies this. The Earl calls him

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1 The italics show the internal rhymes.
liar, and, going away as if to make certain, comes back and says the
King had gone long ago. The rest prepare to follow him. In the
meantime Alexander returns and attacks the King, who defends himself
as best he may. (57 verses.)

The metre is still more complex: verse 12 runs—

Menn til þeir er mjúkust bón,
maetur gjóðaæ beitr,
forðast morð og falskilt ljón
við Froða súka veitr.

V. Headed Fimta skotska. The mansöngr contains 35 verses. “I
cannot offer men a feast of poetry: little of that has Odin given me that
will please fine folk or young maidens: rather it is for the old wife in
her hut, yet I shall make a mansöngr that will contain old instances
worth hearing. Ahab had a wife, fair and false, who stirred him up
against God and his servants, while she sheltered the wicked. For this
they both perished miserably. She tried to kill Elias, but the Lord
delivered him. Let all women then avoid evil, love peace, and follow
virtue. ‘Cold sometimes are women’s counsels,’2 a fact that men often
forget. No one ought to do harm to a servant of God, but rather prize
him highly, for God’s anger is sometimes quick; therefore beware of
opposing him. Prosperity often brings pride, but it is best to be
moderate: a man may be ruddy with health to-day and dead to-morrow.
When I see people proud of themselves, I think what folly it is to deck
out the body and neglect the soul. Let the inner man be adorned with
virtue: that is the best ornament. It is this that God will reward at the
last day; therefore let all keep themselves free from deceit. He that
lives a pure life becomes both king and clerk in God’s kingdom. Here I
end the mansöngr, and turn again to the story.”

The King finally reaches the window, and calls out just as his men
come past. They all turn back, and try to gain entrance to where he
is.

Alexander is unable to wound the King, and is himself stabbed thrice
by Ramsay, who enters the room, and then thrown into the courtyard

1 Maetur: gjóðaæ and Froða: súka are half-rhymes, or skot-hending.
2 An old proverb: Kold eru kvenna rað.
by the King. The armed man walks off, terribly afraid. The Earl in
the courtyard had pretended he had heard no cry: he is now seized by
"Tomas Eskinn," but manages to get away. The King's men rush up
and find Alexander nearly dead, and despatch him, he protesting his
innocence. The Earl comes up with five men and there is a fight at the
chamber door, but "Christ gave the King's men strength and courage,"
and Ramsay runs the Earl through. Meanwhile the other 13 of the
King's followers are breaking down the other door. (52 verses.)

The metre is fairly simple: verse 40 is—

>égar að heyrðu harma sút
Herra sins i garðinn út,
inn um portið allir senn
aptur snær kóngsins menn.

VI. **Mansöngr** of 5 verses: "Now we shall row the dwarf's boat
(poetry) for the sixth time, if men and women will deign to hear. I
am not very skilful at it, but I shall again essay it, if the maid will
listen. Odin's ship (poetry) has but a slight breeze, yet I shall not give
in until the song is ended."

The King and his men offer thanksgivings for his delivery. The
town's folk assemble to avenge the Earl, and the tumult lasts four hours.
The King has the leading men brought to him, and explains all. In
the Earl's breast is found a piece of parchment covered with runes, on
the removal of which his wounds bleed. The King and his men go to
Falkland, and thence to Edinburgh: there is universal rejoicing at his
escape. (37 verses.)

A fairly difficult metre: verse 38 is—

>Firðar sitja Falka-lands
og fara til Ædinburghar;
þar réð sitja beittir branda,
ber nú ði til sorgar.

The subjects of Icelandic **rímur** are mainly taken from the fictitious
sagas, and comparatively few are based on historic incidents. It is
therefore not a little curious to find such an event as the Gowrie Con-
spiration selected for this purpose by the clerical poet, who has thus
produced what is perhaps the only attempt to adorn with poetic colour-
ing a highly romantic occurrence. What led Sir Einar to select his subject it would be useless to inquire; he probably thought it a good one both for the incidents and the lessons to be drawn from them. In point of technique his rímur are very fairly done; and, from their date and the place of their composition, are interesting as a literary curiosity.