

pretty closely. The tale selected for conversion into this metrical form, is almost without exception divided into several sections each of which is worked into a separate *ríma* (or *fytt*). Almost every *ríma* begins with a certain number of introductory lines (a kind of exordium), called "*man-söngur*" or maid-song, as the theme is in most cases either love, a lady, or the poet's own private affairs. Kennings or circumlocutions are extensively used after the style of the old scaldic verse, but not always with as clear an understanding of their original meaning. In the evening the *rímur* were sung century after century in the homes of rich and poor alike, and have thus helped the people to understand the ancient lays. The *rímur* chants are among the most characteristic musical compositions produced in Iceland.

The usual number of lines in a *rímur*-stanza is four, but sometimes only three or even two; they end in a rime of one syllable (or more), internal rimes are not infrequent, and alliteration after the manner of the court-poetry. By varying the number and length of the lines, and by shifting the position of the riming syllables, a great variety was obtained, and the number of metres increased to an incredible extent. Scholars have recorded as many as 2267 metres. To such a length was this artificial riming carried that the poets composed even whole sets of *rímur* in such a way that every stanza could be read, word for word, backward and forward without the least injury to either thought, diction, alliteration or rime-syllables, as the following quatrain will make clear:

Grundar dóma, hvergi hann
hallar réttu máli,
stundar sóma, aldrei ann
örgu pretta táli.

This metre is called *sléttubönd* (= palindrome). By changing the order of words and sentences we obtain four variations of this stanza, each of which can be read backward and forward, so that in reality there are eight variations, all metrically correct and in natural style. Now, by placing the commas in the first and third lines after '*hvergi*' and '*aldrei*' respectively, this verse is changed into a libellous ditty. There are even instances of palindromes that may be changed in ninety six different ways. Such playing upon words may seem useless and excessive, but it shows the importance attached to the form, the metre, by the Icelanders who have made of it an art for art's sake, a problem on which to exercise their ingenuity. In this way the language has, in an ever increasing degree, been attuned to the most elaborate