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*'Drot og Marsk'
A Wormhole to
West Scandinavia*

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Drot og Marsk: a wormhole to West Scandinavia

This article is an extended version of the 'translator's preface' which was published by the Centre for Music Publications of the Royal Library, Copenhagen, on 5 April 2013 in the vocal score of their new edition of Peter Heise's 1878 opera, *Drot og Marsk—King and Marshal*. It aims to consider the implications for our understanding of the shared history of the English and Danish languages which have emerged from this very particular and specialised translation, commissioned for this edition.

The first purpose of the unsingable singers' translation of *Drot og Marsk—King and Marshal*—was to make an English parallel text that would show singers the exact meaning of every single word as precisely as possible, so that they could, when learning their part for a performance, get a real sense of the relative importance or insignificance of each word.

We¹ expected that doing so would present a problem for syntax, that the relationships between the English words would be difficult to untangle if they were in their Danish order.

It seemed desirable, where possible, to find a word equivalence that would keep or parallel the consonants in the Danish original, so that a singer might readily connect them with the English words we've assumed they would already know (in these days when English is, for the time being, the most common international language). We wanted them to feel 'at home' with the texture and sound of the words they were singing, even though English vowels are, in modern speech, quite far removed from those of modern Danish.

We sought to parallel Christian Richardt's deliberately historicist invention of a 'mediaeval' Danish, for example using 'old' words from poetic sources that had fallen out of common usage, with language used at the same time (the third quarter of the nineteenth century) by British writers and artists to conjure their own historicist fantasies of 'old England', for example in the work of the artists and poets of the 'Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood' and the slightly later movements associated with John Ruskin and William Morris. There were no more swains ('svender') in the late nineteenth century English countryside than there are today.

What emerged from the process of making a translation of *Drot og Marsk* that would be of practical use to singers has been something of a surprise, as we did not expect to find so many Danish words as close to surviving English ones as they are, and we were pleased, too, to find how rarely we were defeated by syntactical inequivalence. We have, we think, succeeded in showing that it is possible to make a convergent translation between Danish and English in the very particular case of this opera libretto, because we have been able to ignore the currency of usage of words and expressions, and gloss over the sometimes considerable differences that exist in modern speech and writing conventions, not least because the libretto's lines are, for the most part, relatively straight forward utterances.

There is enough common ground between the vocabulary and syntax of the two languages to evoke the ideas presented in recent times by archaeologists like Colin Renfrew² and Marek Zvebil³, and the genetic historian Stephen Oppenheimer,⁴ and to deduce that the people living across the land of north western Europe before ice-melt waters broke through and flooded what are now the North Sea and the Channel, were speaking one language before they were separated by the water flow which began their languages' distinctive development.

Recent writing has maintained something of the old idea, that the 'Indo-European' language group 'emerged' from the ice-age refuge in the Balkans after the last period of ice, the 'Younger Dryas Event' in c. 9,000 BC, and gradually spread northwards as the need for more farming land and the milder climate worked together to encourage settlement of central and northern Europe. But there is no evidence that the hunter-gatherers who preceded this 'wave' of Indo-European farmers (dated from c. 6,000 BC) were not already speaking this one language.⁵ Perhaps the wave model of language

transmission in Europe is misleading, and the isolated non-Indo-European languages, Basque, Albanian and Etruscan, are not so much evidence of chronological layers in which one language group dominates only to be suppressed by a successor, but rather evidence of greater linguistic diversity in what was, after all, a massive land area populated very sparsely indeed. A possibility which has emerged from the latest revisions to our archaeological knowledge of the very early movement of hominids from Africa, from a population estimated at around 20,000 in all, suggests that there might be a correlation between the settlement locations of Neanderthals (from whom light skin and red hair are supposed to have come) with non-Indo-European languages in modern Europe, and of *homo sapiens* with the areas of Indo-European speaking. It has become clear that the two populations co-existed for some time, and interbred. Perhaps Indo-European languages survived best because their speakers were the most economically successful of the inhabitants of pre-historic Europe. Perhaps the notion of 'language migration' after the ice age should be replaced, as the old myths of Celtic migration were put aside, with a recognition that the Indo-European languages may have originated far earlier than previously supposed, in the family groupings of those who travelled from Africa, placing the origins of our languages at the beginning of the species' evolution, perhaps some 200,000 years ago.

Certainly the 'normal' history of the English language is quite mistaken. It has been evident for some time that the old stories about the Romans 'pushing aside' the 'Bretonic' speaking Celts are completely untrue. The Galicians, Bretons, Cornish, Welsh, Scots and Irish were, demonstrates Stephen Oppenheimer, always coastal peoples, confined to the Atlantic seaboard from their probable origins in the Basque (and therefore perhaps non-Indo-European speaking) region which, like the Balkans, was high enough to provide refuge from the ice. It isn't clear why or when they adopted the Indo-European Celtic languages they all share now, but they were not the inhabitants of eastern England at the time of the Roman invasions in 55 and 54 BC. One group who were inhabitants of the southern coastlands of England were, according to Julius Cæsar, Belgians, members of the same tribe who lived across the Channel, and speaking the same Germanic language.⁶ They were not heroic sailors or colonists: their presence on both sides of the Channel supports the proposition that languages, and recognisable ethnic 'family' connections, could survive the flood which separated the British Isles from continental Europe.

If it is true, as David Crystal writes in *The Stories of English* (p. 59) that palatalization changed the original 'sk' of English words to 'sh' around the 3rd century AD, half way through the Roman occupation, then the settled population of the land must have been speaking a version of the Norse language to have an 'sk' sound to change.⁷ These words—like 'skær<sheer' and 'skinne<shine'—remain the most conspicuous and by far the most easily identifiable element in the common vocabulary of Danish and English. But, as the language of *Drot og Marsk's* libretto shows, that common vocabulary extends very widely indeed.

Of course not all the words in common date from olden times, and quite a number of shared words—'hej<hi' for example—have arrived far more recently.⁸ Buried in modes of speech and common expressions or the ritualised language of ceremonies are phrases like, 'be upstanding for the Queen', and one can adroitly compose more than 'unruly and utterly awkward sentences' which can be set over into Danish equivalents without any barrier. Once the main manoeuvres have been spotted—the change of 'sk' to 'sh'; the addition of 'w' to words like 'word' ('ord') and to Danish question words like what, why and when (there has been a switch of letters - the Danish words have a silent 'h' before 'v' where English adds a 'w' as well as 'h'); and the changes where orthography (the writing out of a sound) has left us with identical sounds but different looking words, or identical looking words with completely different sounds—you begin to appreciate the scale of the surviving fellowship. It is, indeed, easier to believe that the languages have a history which extends far back beyond the ice age when you consider the glacially slow rate of change that has allowed both to remain so close today.

Unsurprisingly, it is the words in most regular use that have changed the most: it's a long journey from 'hilse' to 'hello', through 'hail' (as in '...good fellow well met') and now sharing 'hi'. The words which have survived with the same or recognisably related meanings in both languages are the ones which

have become trapped, like flies in amber, in 'expressions' and 'modes of speech', which are only used in particular circumstances. 'Slag', meaning a woman with a casual attitude to her relationships with men, survives in nearly the same form in both languages; only babies 'thrive' in modern English usage, and only car horns or children's toys 'toot' ('tyt') like the backstage trumpet in *Drot og Marsk*. In the libretto wooden beams are 'knækert' – 'knackered' – an expression only used of horses for many years. The shift in sense is not just recognisable in English: 'ram' (meaning hit hard) is still current in English, at least so far as motor traffic is concerned, but sits less comfortably with that sense in modern Danish, and only some contexts allow the translation of 'så' as 'so' or 'til' as 'to', because their normal meaning in both languages has shifted out of alignment. Some words look and sound the same, but have taken on slightly different meanings. Siger < say and taler < tell illustrate an interesting shift. They must have started in the same place, but both words have become slightly more specialised in both languages—but in precisely the opposite way! So in English we 'say something' and 'tell someone'; we cannot 'tell something', and if we want to express communication with another person using 'say', we need to use a preposition like 'to'. The Danish practice is the exact reverse, though the same words are used. Danish preserves broad labels for process concepts like learning-teaching and borrowing, and uses the same words, 'lære' and 'låne', for each. English has needed a more pragmatic description of these processes, so distinguishes 'teaching' from 'learning' where Danish does not, and similarly 'borrowing' from 'loaning'. The words for ideas of 'look' and 'see' share a similarly crooked path from their common origin. Sometimes an expression survives in both languages, with a slight modification: if we think someone has made an appropriate choice, for example of their occupation, or hairstyle, in Danish we say 'det klæder dig' ('that clothes you'), and in English a French word for 'clothe' has slipped in and we say instead, 'that suits you'. We've even grown an adjective, 'suitable', from the expression. Our two languages have developed differing conventions to express the difference between particular objects and their universal kinds; Danish speaks of a single wing, arrow, wood, where English insists on using the plural of these words in the same contexts.

There are, of course, puzzles that these parallels do not help us understand, like the 'old' names in England which have been labelled 'Celtic' or 'pre-Anglo-Saxon'.⁹ But it seems clear that the 'Anglo-Saxons' who arrived after the Romans left around 400AD came to a country already populated largely by people speaking their own language, their 'cousins' in a sense, people who could understand the language and feel the cultural connections of *Beowulf* (a story of Danish heroes and dragons) just as the Vikings arrived some four hundred years later to find that their close relatives were not in the least happy to welcome them despite them speaking a language that must have been mutually comprehensible.

Given the length of time that has passed since Danish and English were divided, at least 8,000 years since the North Sea and Channel broke through, and acknowledging that the Danish content of English has been topped up by two subsequent immigrations of Danish speakers, it still seems extraordinary that such a large common ground exists between two languages. Their sounds seem so different these days, and an ordinary Englishman can certainly be perplexed by the sound of modern Danish (Stephen Fry¹⁰); but the stories which survive on both sides of the seas about fishermen from Jylland and Yorkshire being able to converse with each other in their dialects during the twentieth century, if not as easily as in earlier times, are evidence that the languages were once a single language held in common, a fellowship that survived the watery intrusion. There are still pockets of recognisable Danish in English speech: for example Danish pronouns and irregular verb endings still thrive in the Dearne Valley in South Yorkshire, once home to Ivanhoe (Walter Scott) and his Danish foes, and the glottal stop lives on in East London's cockney and the so-called 'common' speech of southern England.

How has the huge variation in sound arisen? The great differential appears to be trade. Both Denmark and England have long and considerable histories of trading adventures in far distant places. At the time of Nelson's 1807 raid on Copenhagen, the Danish mercantile fleet he captured was nearly the size of the British fleet, and the two countries had been close rivals; the enforcement of a blockade against Napoleonic Europe gave the British an excuse to solve a commercial challenge with brutal force. With characteristic self-importance, the English have forgotten that they were once ruled (in the eleventh

century) by Danish kings, and that in the eighteenth century the Danes had a fleet that rivalled Britannia's. But while Denmark's wealth in mediaeval times came from trade in the Baltic and the Hanseatic ports, and especially from the tax levied on naval traffic passing through the Skattegat, Britain's business was done with a western European market, notably including the French and Portuguese Atlantic seaboard for its wines, 'claret' and 'port'. The causes of the 'great vowel shift' are complex¹¹ but may include the influence of sounds from the Romance languages, where Danish trade was more tightly focused on Nordic and Germanic speaking partnerships (Erik Glipping was married to Agnes of Brandenburg, while his English contemporary, Henry III, was married to Eleanor of Provence and was the grandson of Eleanor of Aquitaine, who had brought considerable possessions in France to the English crown). The arrival of Norsemen speaking their adopted language, French, in 1066, seems to have had only a very gradual influence on English vernacular speech, as French was used only by the court and lawyers; it was the trading links that the French connection fostered which gradually brought about the Frenchification of English over the next five hundred years, until its vocabulary and pronunciation stabilised in the great literary flowering at the end of the sixteenth century.

At the time of the action of *Drot og Marsk* (1286), Danish and English will have sounded much more like each other than they do today. The vowels, in which the difference is now so marked, began 'the great vowel shift' during the century after Glipping's death, so that when Chaucer was writing in the second half of the fourteenth century, English 'y' still sounded like modern Danish 'y' (like German 'ü'), and the vowels of English 'a' and 'e' made the broad sounds of their modern names, rather than the modified sounds we use nowadays. One of the ways a Danish-English bilingual reader can test this proposition of a common source for both languages is to read Chaucer: it's startlingly accessible if you don't try to work out which language it is you're thinking in while you read.

Of course this translation of Christen Richardt's *Drot og Marsk* is not, in itself, proof that Danish and English share an ancient common root; but it lays out the ground upon which such a view might be supported, challenges the traditional histories of English and Danish as well as the old etymologies based on the written word alone. In paralleling the new archaeological and genetic evidence of prehistoric humanity's journey, this work aims to throw dust in the face of a very old ghost, our common linguistic ancestor, which, if its roots go back beyond the ice ages, is quite literally older than our hills.

Peter Heise's *Drot og Marsk—King and Marshal* is published by the Royal Library, Copenhagen, in collaboration with Edition-S (e-mail sales@edition-s.dk).

Colin Roth

¹ 'We' includes the author of this article, Colin Roth; *Drot og Marsk*'s Editor-in-Chief, Niels Krabbe; and Eskil Irminger, who has generously supported the translation work by catching errors, fielding misunderstandings, and providing a wealth of helpful background information about Danish literature and the text's references. Of course the errors and misunderstandings which remain are the responsibility of Colin Roth, not his collaborators.

² Colin Renfrew, *Archaeology and Language: the puzzle of Indo-European origins*, London 1987, and with Peter Forster, *Phylogenetic methods and the prehistory of languages*, Cambridge 2006, in which Chapter 11, 'Evolution of English Basic Vocabulary within the Network of Germanic Languages' by Peter Forster, Tobias Polzin and Arne Röhl, pp. 131-7, was particularly significant because it supported the thought process which led to the ideas presented in this article: 'A Scandinavian component in English must also be considered, which may even predate the traditional Norse invasions.'

³ Marek Zvelebil (1952-2011) wrote or edited more than a hundred scholarly works, including *Hunters in Transition* (1986) and "Plant Use in the Mesolithic and its role in the transition to farming" (1994). My conversations with him about the ideas expressed in this article took place between 2007 and his death in 2011.

⁴ Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British*, London, 2006.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 117.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 311-23.

⁷ David Crystal, *The Stories of English*, London 2004, p. 59.

⁸ 'Hi' has come into English from American films.

⁹ Oppenheimer, *op. cit.*, pp. 325-9.

¹⁰ A view expressed during his tv series on language made for the BBC and broadcast in 2011.

¹¹ David Crystal, *op.cit.*, pp. 223, 251-3. The 'great vowel shift' took approximately 200 years, roughly between the careers of Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, so from the 14th to the beginning of the 16th century.