

BUILDING UP THE TIES WITH THE PAST: AUGUST STRINDBERG AND STARKAÐR

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In his long and turbulent literary career, the Swedish writer August Strindberg (1849–1912) drew on material from an astonishing variety of sources to shape his literary universe, the vast boundaries of which bear indisputable witness to his exceedingly broad palette of interests as a reader. A cursory glimpse at a list of his works, which span a period of about forty years, reveals that a number of them were inspired by Old Norse literature, as some of the titles more or less clearly indicate. The fact that such works are generally not reckoned among Strindberg's masterpieces helps to explain why they have, until now, hardly been blessed with scholarly attention. Two notable exceptions must be mentioned, however: one is *Den fredlöse* (*The Outlaw*), a play written in 1871 that was influenced by Strindberg's early interest in the Nordic Middle Ages, when he was a student in Uppsala; and the other is the well-known poem *Lokes smädelser* (*Loki's Taunts*), inspired by the eddic poem *Lokasenna* and included in the miscellany *Dikter på vers och prosa* (*Poems in Verse and Prose*), published in 1883.¹

Not surprisingly, the few other works dealing with the legacy of the Middle Ages have been rather neglected, although they are certainly interesting in many respects, not least from the point of view of reception studies. As a general note, it is safe to assert that Strindberg's appropriation and reworking of

¹ On *Lokes smädelser*, see Schulz 2009.

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the literary heritage of medieval Scandinavia has been fairly marginalized in international scholarship. The two minor works which are the topic of the present essay show a common interest in the legendary figure of Starkaðr, one of the most renowned heroes of the Nordic Middle Ages: the first, *Sagan om Stig Storverks son* (*The Saga of Stig Storverk's Son*), opens the collection entitled *Nya svenska öden* (*New Swedish Destinies*) — also known as *Hövdingaminnen* (*Chieftain Memories*) — which was published in 1906; and the second is a play, *Starkodder Skald* (*Starkodder the Skald*), of which only the prologue and the first act exist, as Strindberg did not complete the work.

The aim of the present essay is to make some observations about how and why Strindberg fashioned this short narrative and the play by taking inspiration, either directly or indirectly, from a number of Old Norse literary works, which are not all strictly related to the story of the legendary hero. In particular, some of the innovative aspects of Starkaðr's characterization will be singled out and commented upon. As briefly mentioned above, Strindberg's interest in the Nordic Middle Ages can be traced back to his earliest literary activity (Törnqvist 1996). In particular, his Uppsala years gave him the chance to learn Old Icelandic literature as part of a major course in Danish literature. Thanks to Hans Lindström's meticulous survey (1977–90), it is known for certain that at that time the young August borrowed the *Kings' sagas*, *Morkinskinna*, and *Fornaldar Sögur Norðrlanda* (published in 1829–30 by Carl Christian Rafn) from libraries in Stockholm and Uppsala (Törnqvist 1996, 9). In addition, references to the Poetic Edda and the Christian poem *Sólarljóð* (*The Song of the Sun*) are plentiful in his writings even at this early stage. The study of Old Norse literature went alongside Strindberg's passionate reading of Adam Oehlenschläger's works inspired by medieval Nordic material (on which see Tereza Lansing's essay in this volume). In fact, Oehlenschläger was explicitly regarded as a model for quite some time by the young Strindberg, and he certainly had an influence on his formation as a playwright (Fehrman 1979). In those years, he and some of his fellow students in Uppsala even founded a literary society called *Runa*, the name of which is to be understood, in Strindberg's own words, as related to 'den då rådande nynordiska renässansen' (the new Nordic renaissance that was prevailing at that time).² As a matter of fact, the whole of the nineteenth century in Sweden, as well as in the rest of Scandinavia, was characterized by a growing interest in the Middle Ages and its heritage (Mjöberg 1967–68).

² Strindberg wrote about his experience as a member and co-founder of *Runa* in the second volume of *Tjänstekvinnans son* (*The Son of a Servant*), published in 1887.

In 1872, Strindberg wrote an *apologia* entitled 'Latin eller svenska?' ('Latin or Swedish?'), in which he praised the greatness and richness of Old Norse literature. In this essay, Strindberg establishes a strong genealogical connection between Sweden and its language and the language used for the sagas and the texts making up the mythographic tradition. In particular, he encourages his contemporaries to read works such as *Gísla saga*, *Gunnlaugs saga*, and Snorri's *Heimskringla*, which, in his view, could speak to the hearts of Swedish people more directly than any monument of Latin literature (Strindberg 1912, 263). Also in 1872, he wrote *Början av Ån bogsveigis saga* (*The Beginning of Ån Bogsveig's Saga*), based on a younger *fornaldarsaga* (*Åns saga bogsveigis*) that he was able to read in the original, having borrowed a copy of Rafn's edition from the Royal Library in Stockholm.³

Sagan om Stig Storverks Son

The two works centred around the story of Starkaðr that will be discussed here belong to a different stage of Strindberg's literary career, as they were written after the so-called *Infernokris*, which marked the last years of the nineteenth century. In particular, the period in which he wrote *Sagan om Stig Storverks Son* and *Starkodder Skald* is characterized by a shift in Strindberg's interests away from a strictly national perspective on history to focus on world history (Svensson 2000, 9). He illustrated his view of world history in a long essay entitled 'Världshistoriens mystik' ('The Mysticism of World History') that was published in 1903, first as a series of articles in *Svenska Dagbladet*, and then as a separate work. Whereas at the turn of the century (1898–1902) most of his artistic effort went into composing a number of historical dramas devoted to the most prominent kings and regents of Swedish history, including some from the Middle Ages, a clear turn is apparent after the publication of *Historiska miniatyrer* (*Historical Miniatures*) in 1905. The first experiment in Strindberg's new course was the collection *Nya svenska öden*, in which *Sagan om Stig Storverks son* is the opening story. In a letter to his editor Karl Bonnier (5 September 1905), Strindberg describes his new work as 'ett djerft försök sätta in Svenska Historien i Verldshistoriens ram, att få nytt ljus på gamla saker, ny värdering på äldre värden' (Svensson 1998, 300) (a bold attempt at placing Sweden's history within the frame of world history, at getting new light on old things, a new evaluation of older values). Thus he aimed to frame Swedish history within the context of world history.

³ On this text, see Lombardi's essay in this volume.

Strindberg's fascination with Starkaðr and his interpretation of the legendary poet's nature are couched in clear terms in one of his numerous annotations to an early draft of the story:

Det finnes två Starkad (Starkodd, Starkodder), en mytisk och en från Sagan; men det fins äfven två Starkoddertyper inom sagan; en ädel hjelte, ett slags profet som straffade dåliga konungar med hårda ord, och en niding. Denna senare, hvars öde liknar en Grekisk tragedi, har intresserat mig. (Svensson 1998, 318)

(There are two Starkads (Starkodd, Starkodder): a mythical one and one from the saga. But there are two Starkad types within the saga as well: a noble hero, some sort of prophet who punished evil kings with harsh words, and a villain. This latter one, whose destiny resembles a Greek tragedy, has aroused my interest.)⁴

Hence he is interested first and foremost in the complexity and ambiguity of Starkaðr as the various medieval sources depict him.⁵ The fullest accounts of Starkaðr's life are represented by Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* (Books VI–VIII) and by the longer version of *Gautreks saga*.⁶ Despite the discrepancies that can be observed by scrutinizing all the sources, some core features of the portrait of the hero can be identified on the grounds that they occur in different accounts: the legendary hero is generally represented as an excellent warrior and a gifted poet of giant origin, a figure whose fate is closely related to the influence of Óðinn. Starkaðr is granted three lifespans, but in each of them he is said to commit a shameful and abominable crime. The killing of two prominent kings, Víkarr and Áli, is mentioned in the sources, but there is no consensus among scholars on the third crime (Bampi 2006).

As was seen above, however, Strindberg's interest in Starkaðr is also grounded in the fact that the hero's origins and trajectory invite comparison with the fate of figures of Greek tragedy. The Swede is particularly attracted by the analogies between the Nordic hero and Hercules:

⁴ All translations are my own.

⁵ For a complete survey of the sources, see Ciklamini 1971; see also Clunies Ross 2006 and Poole 2006.

⁶ *Gautreks saga* (Rafn 1829–30, III, 1–53) has been preserved in two different versions. The account of Starkaðr's life, which focuses mostly on his youth, is present only in the longer version, which is commonly held to be based on the shorter one. The oldest extant manuscript of the longer version of *Gautreks saga* is AM 152 fol. (Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum), which has been recently dated to 1500–25. On the manuscript tradition of the longer version of *Gautreks saga*, see Bampi 2009, 57–59.

Man kan äfven spåra Herakles-typen i Starkad. Född af gud och menniska, förföljd af Magterna (Juno), utför han många Storverk. I Starkad har jag därför inlagt Omfalemotivet. (Svensson 1998, 318)

(One can even track the Herakles type in Starkad. Born of god and woman, persecuted by the Powers (Juno), he accomplishes many great deeds. In Starkad I have, therefore, added the Omphale motif.)

What is more, Starkaðr's destiny is decided by the gods in quite the same way as with other major heroes of Greek mythology:

Hela hans bana är förutsagd: att han skall begå ett nidingsdåd i hvarje mansålder o.s.v. Mannen är således utan skuld; men hans samvete plågar honom likafullt; och straffet uteblir icke, allmän förakt, samtidens glömska och otacksamhet. (Svensson 1998, 318)

(His whole career is predetermined: he shall commit a heinous deed in each lifespan, and so on. The man is therefore not to blame, but his conscience torments him all the same. Punishment does not fail to come: general contempt, oblivion, and ingratitude from his contemporaries.)

The idea that the fate of individuals is decided by divine powers is a recurrent theme in Strindberg's post-*Inferno* work. Furthermore, the combination of what is presented by the Swedish writer as Starkaðr's innocence ('mannen är således utan skuld') and the ingratitude and contempt of his contemporaries is clearly reminiscent of other similar statements that can be found throughout Strindberg's work — for example, in *Folkungasagan* about King Magnus Eriksson,⁷ to cite but one major instance. This, together with the representation of Starkaðr as a poet and an outcast in the medieval sources, led Strindberg to draw a parallel between the hero's life and his own.

Before moving on to discuss some of the details of *Sagan om Stig Storverks son*, a few comments about the sources used by Strindberg are in order. All scholars agree that he primarily used the first volume of Starbäck's *Berättelser ur svenska historien* (*Stories from Swedish History*, 1885), which integrates different accounts about Starkaðr (including *Norna-Gests þátr*) into a coherent and straightforward story. As Svensson points out (1998, 321), Strindberg cer-

⁷ *Folkungasagan*, published in 1899, is the play that inaugurates the series of historical dramas that Strindberg devoted to Sweden's national history. The main figure in *Folkungasagan* is King Magnus Eriksson, whose destiny is one of sorrow and grief, as he was chosen to bear the burden of all the misdeeds and crimes committed by his predecessors in the Folkung dynasty. On *Folkungasagan* and Swedish medieval history, see Bampi 2011. For a short introduction to Strindberg's history plays as a whole, see Wikander 2009.

tainly used Starbäck's work for quotations from the Poetic Edda as well, which provides, alongside *Snorra Edda*, the mythological frame of the whole story. In addition, he drew on material from Saxo's *Gesta Danorum* and from the first volume of A. A. Afzelius's *Swenska Folkets Sago-häfder* (*Historical Tales of the Swedish People*, 1839–70), which was a popular account of Swedish history and traditional customs. By contrast, nothing certain can be said about the direct use of *Gautreks saga*. More generally, however, it is safe to assert that Strindberg's knowledge of Old Norse mythology was also based on the works of Viktor Rydberg on Nordic and Germanic mythology, such as *Fädernas gudasaga* (*Our Fathers' Godsaga*, 1887) and *Undersökningar i germansk mytologi* (*Studies in Germanic Mythology*, 1886–89) (Holmberg 1935). Furthermore, he also made use of Sophus Bugge's *Studier over de nordiske Gude- og Heltesagns Oprindelse* (*Studies on the Origin of Nordic Mythological and Heroic Tales*, 1881–89), an extensively annotated copy of which is known to have been part of Strindberg's library (Svensson 1998, 319).

A close examination of the opening story of Strindberg's *Nya svenska öden* reveals that the main events and characteristics of Starkaðr's life as told in *Sagan om Stig Storverks son* are basically the same as those found in Saxo's account in *Gesta Danorum* and in *Gautreks saga*. Needless to say, Strindberg did not confine himself to borrowing themes and motifs from these works. In fact, several additions to the traditional account have been made to highlight some aspects of the story, or even to invent new ones, which were meant to elaborate themes found throughout Strindberg's literary oeuvre, as will be shown further below. In *Sagan om Stig Storverks son*, Stig is the name assigned to the figure who in Old Norse sources is known as Starkaðr. In fact, the name Starkodd is introduced into the narrative at a later stage and is attached to Stig as a byname.⁸ The story opens in Sweden, on Lake Mälaren. A man named Okel and his wife, Signy, are on a boat together with their son, Nare. The details given by Strindberg indicate that they are all giants (*jättefolket*). Their dark appearance marks a clear distinction between them and the light that characterizes the temple of Baldr, which is placed at the centre of the scene. The contrast between dark and light is emphasized throughout the first part of the story expressly to bring to the fore the otherness of Nare's family and its isolation:

'Tror du aldrig vi mörka bli ljusa?' sade Signy.

'De ljusa männen äkta ibland mörka kvinnor, och deras barn blir ljusa; men ännu aldrig har en svart man fått en vit kvinna.' (Svensson 1998, 12)

⁸ The meaning of Starkodd (*stark* + *udd*) is 'arrowhead'.

(‘Do you ever think that we, the dark ones, shall be bright?’ Signy asked. ‘Bright men sometimes marry dark women and their children become bright, but never has a black man had a white woman.’)

As soon as Nare sees Sigurlin, one of the prophetesses of Baldr’s temple, he falls in love with her, and loses his strength. Okel wants his son to lie with the maiden so that she can give birth to a son, who will become the defender of his people. By means of sorcery, Okel is able to lead his son to Sigurlin. Although what happens during the night is not told, everything suggests that the young boy rapes her. When she wakes up the following day, she feels sick. Soon it is discovered that she has fallen victim to sorcery and is taken away from the temple. Nine months later a child is born who is immediately abandoned in the forest inhabited by wolves. Sigurlin disappears from the scene, taken away by a beautiful white swan that leads her into the sun.

The young Stig is fostered by a man named Rossbarsgrane, corresponding to Hrosshársgrani (one of Óðinn’s bynames) in *Gautreks saga*. The traits characterizing Stig’s life are basically the same as those in the Old Norse tradition: his isolation from society, his extraordinary skills as a fighter, the wounds that he receives every time he fights in battle, and his relationship with Vikar, which comes to an end when Stig/Starkaðr offers his foster-brother to Óðinn. As in the Old Norse tradition, the killing of Vikar is the first of three treacherous murders. The life of Stig ends very much in the same manner as in Saxo’s account: after years of grief, self-contempt, and remorse, the giant succeeds in convincing young Hother (i.e., Hatherus in *Gesta Danorum*, Book VIII) to kill him, thus putting an end to his suffering. As mentioned earlier, however, Strindberg made some remarkable additions to the traditional characterization of Starkaðr. As regards the plot development, two major examples are represented by the valkyrie Veborg, who takes the role of the giant’s despotic wife, and Alf, Stig’s young squire. Both characters can be said to serve one and the same purpose in Strindberg’s view, which is to frame the story within an overall thematic pattern, including aspects that have been part of his own conceptual universe since the beginning of his career. Veborg is portrayed as a beautiful and domineering woman who is able to turn the ever-fighting giant into a weak lover.⁹ As a consequence, Starkaðr is willing to do whatever she orders him to do and spends his time chatting with women in the kitchen, until he flees from her to resume his life as a warrior. The humiliation he suffers from Veborg

⁹ According to Ollén (1996, 393), the main source of inspiration for Veborg is very likely to have been Harriet Bosse, Strindberg’s third wife.

was probably added to invite a comparison with Hercules, as seen above. Stig is indeed humiliated by Veborg in very much the same way as Hercules is by Omphale, who even forces him to dress up as a woman:

Om kvällen lekte de på gården; Stig blev utklädd i kjortel och kåpa; och flickorna flätade hans hår. Då ropade inifrån stugan och det lät illa. Stig skyndade dit. (Svensson 1998, 26)

(At night they were playing in the yard; Stig was dressed in kirtle and hood and the maidens plaited his hair. Then there was a scream from inside the cottage, and it sounded bad. Stig hurried inside.)

The other new character, Alf, is by Stig's side, advising and assisting him on many occasions. Yet he 'steals' some of the beautiful verses about the battle at Brávellir composed by Stig, pretending to be the poet himself. There is no doubt that Veborg and Alf reveal an autobiographical concern. Veborg's role parallels that of the majority of female characters in Strindberg's literary oeuvre, the negative characterization of which reflects the writer's long harboured belief that women represented a threat and an obstacle for himself and his literary career (Fahlgren 2009). The theme of the contrast between man and woman is related here to that of paternity — that is, another major topic that appears throughout Strindberg's oeuvre, most notably in *Fadren* ('The Father', 1887) — as Veborg is bearing Stig's daughter and uses her pregnancy to blackmail him: he shall be acknowledged as the father only if he obeys her. Veborg and her maidens represent a matriarchal society in which power relations are reversed. The consequences of a world led by women is another important leitmotif in *Nya svenska öden* and is certainly to be read against the backdrop of Strindberg's fierce polemic against the feminist movement of his time (Svensson 2000, 216–23). The relationship between Stig and Veborg ends tragically, with him killing her on the battlefield at Bråvalla. This is one of the shameful crimes committed by Stig. Furthermore, Alf is taken to represent Geijerstam, one of Strindberg's former friends who then turned into one of his adversaries. This connection is proven by the fact that Strindberg wrote 'GafG' (i.e., Gustaf af Geijerstam) in Greek letters in a draft of the story with reference to Alf (Ollén 1996, 393).

Another timeless figure to whom Strindberg refers extensively in the drafting of his short story about Starkaðr is Merlin,¹⁰ a figure who shares some rel-

¹⁰ Strindberg had planned to devote a play to Merlin. Judging from the preparatory material, he was planning to model the famous wizard on Starkaðr (Svensson 1998, 322).

evant traits with the Scandinavian hero: both are poets, both are born out of an act of violence involving a supernatural being (in the case of Merlin, an incubus) and a woman (Svensson 1998, 322). As a result of their double origin, both are a mixture of good and evil. The negative role that Vivien, Merlin's wife, plays in the magician's life (according to Strindberg¹¹) is very likely to have prompted him to invent Veborg in order to emphasize the common trait in both stories.¹² Last but not least, he explicitly compares Starkaðr with Ahasverus, the wandering Jew. In one of the drafts of the story, after the title *Starkad Storverks Son* he adds in parentheses: 'Ahasverus blir ung hvart hundrade år' (Ahasverus becomes young every hundredth year).¹³

Another relevant example of Strindberg's reworking process is the scene leading up to the verbal duel between Óðinn and Þórr, which develops a dreamlike dimension reminiscent of similar scenes in Strindberg's plays from the period after the *Inferno* crisis.¹⁴ The choice of names given to the main characters of the plot is suggestive of both major and minor names in Old Norse literature. As Conny Svensson points out (1998, 358), Okel and his wife Signy are anagrams of the god Loke/Loki and Sigyn. Moreover, Nare appears as the couple's son in *Snorra Edda* (ch. 33). Thus Strindberg's reworking of the medieval material is itself mythopoetic, as the invented genealogy of Stig demonstrates. Hence Loki is presented as Stig's grandfather. As a descendant of Loki, Stig is destined to lead the life of an outsider, deprived of sociality. Anything he does or says is scorned, no matter whether he is right or wrong. Interestingly, in the scene depicting the assembly of the gods, in which Stig's destiny is decided by Óðinn and Þórr, thirteen seats (instead of twelve) are mentioned in the short story. Nare, Okel's son, occupies the additional seat. In all likelihood this means that Stig's behaviour and conduct in life are determined both by the gods and

¹¹ In one of the annotations (Svensson 1998, 322) preceding the composition of *Sagan om Stig Storverks Son*, Strindberg writes about Viviane: 'Viviane [...] plågar honom, och slutligen förvandlar honom i en hagtornsbuske' (Viviane [...] torments him and eventually turns him into a hawthorn bush).

¹² The name Veborg is reminiscent of that of Vébjörg, a *skjaldmær* at Brávellir, according to the *Gesta Danorum* and *Sögubrot*. Strindberg's Veborg, however, has a life story before the battle and her murder.

¹³ See Svensson 1998, 317. The wandering Jew is a relevant figure also in *Historiska miniatyrer* (*Historical Miniatures*), especially in the stories entitled *Ismael* and *Eremiten Peter* (*Peter the Hermit*). See Svensson 2000, 70–72.

¹⁴ For example, in the trilogy *Till Damaskus* (*To Damascus*, 1898–1901) and in *Ett drömspel* (*A Dream Play*, 1901).

by his own lineage, represented here by Nare himself. Furthermore, throughout the story, Loke crops up time and again, especially at major turning points, and mostly in disguise. The most important example is when, immediately after the assembly of the gods, a fish prompts Stig to do Óðinn's will by killing Vikar:

Allt förvandlades igen, och Stig satt åter på sin sten vid fallet. Då kom en stor fisk ur älven; det kunde vara en lax, och han bar ett vassrör i munnen!

'Stig,' sade han; 'Ódin den höge, åtrar offret; Vikar valde han; giv du döden.' Och han lade röret vid Stigs fötter; därmed försvann han. (Svensson 1998, 19)

(Everything changed again, and Stig was sitting back on his stone by the waterfall. Then a big fish came from the river. It could have been a salmon, and it was holding a reed in its mouth!

'Stig,' it said, 'Óðinn the high one desires a sacrifice. He chose Vikar; you shall kill him.' And it laid the reed at Stig's feet and disappeared.)

The fish is most probably Loki in disguise, as Svensson has pointed out (1998, 360).

Starkodder Skald

The same tendency of enhancing and expanding the mythological dimension of Starkaðr's life can be found in the unfinished play *Starkodder skald: Forn-Nordiskt Sagodrama*. The prologue was published in 1906. In addition, Strindberg provided the music that was meant to accompany some lines taken from the Old Icelandic *Sólarljóð* (Ollén 1996, 307), as will be discussed in some detail below. The first act was published as it stood — that is, in incomplete form — in 1918, six years after Strindberg's death. In the fragment, Starkodder is in fact completely absent as a character. Although it appears likely that *Starkodder skald* owes some debts to the opening story of *Nya svenska öden*, Ollén points out that plans to write a play about Starkaðr's life may have predated the composition of *Sagan om Stig Storverks Son* (1996, 395).

The prologue opens somewhere near Lake Mälaren on a midsummer's night. As in the short story, the temple of Baldr is part of the setting, together with a forest and some cliffs. Loke and Storverk, Starkodder's father, start a dialogue which is clearly modelled on the structure used in *Gylfaginning*:

STORVERK

Säg mig, fader, vem var först,
Asen eller Jätten?

LOKE

Ymir, jätten, var den första!

Bure var hans borna bror;
 Bures son var Odin fader,
 Bestla hette Odins moder
 Och hon var av jättebörd –
 Vem är jätte vem är Ase,
 Vem har söndrat Ymers ätt? (Ollén 1996, 304)

(STORVERK
 Tell me, father, who was first,
 the Æsir or the Giants?

LOKE
 Ymir, the giant, was the first!
 Bure was his born brother;
 Bure's son was Óðinn's father,
 Bestla was the name of Óðinn's mother,
 And she was of giant descent –
 Who is giant? who is god?
 Who has split Ymir's family?)

In the dialogue, the opposition between giants and gods — referred to as *höga makter* (high powers) — is brought to the fore. Some of Loke's answers are clearly reminiscent of the god's words in *Lokes smädelser*:

LOKE
 Intet är av evigt ämne,
 Allt ju ändras, ömsas, åldras [...]
 Asa-Gudar äro gamle,
 Iduns äpplen ätna upp. (Ollén 1996, 305)

(Nothing is of eternal matter,
 everything changes and ages,
 the Æsir are old,
 Iðunn's apples eaten up.)

As in *Sagan om Storverks son*, Sigurlin comes onto the scene. Loke wants his son to copulate with her so that a child will be born. Unlike in the short story, however, the contrast here is firstly between Óðinn and Loki and then between Óðinn (referred to as Rossbarsgrane) and Þórr. The quarrel between Loke and Óðinn is centred on the supremacy of the Æsir in relation to the giants. According to Loke, the time prior to the arrival of the Æsir was one of peace and harmony:

LOKE

Så kom I [...]
 Och den gyllne ålders frid
 Följdes nu av Asastrid.
 Säg mig Rossbarsgrane, Vise
 Odin, har jag talat sant? (Ollén 1996, 313)

(Then you came [...]
 and the peace of the golden age
 was followed by the Æsir war.
 Tell me, Rossbarsgrane, wise
 Óðinn, have I spoken the truth?)

Loke is described by Óðinn as his own foster-brother, although the relationship between them has now turned into one of enmity. Loke announces Storverk's impending marriage, fooling Óðinn into believing that the bride is the daughter of a wealthy farmer named Fänring. The opposition between Óðinn and Þórr is the same as the one we find in *Sagan om Stig Storverks son* and *Gautreks saga*: Þórr is responsible for the decisions condemning the hero to a life full of sorrow and scorn, while Óðinn bestows on him a number of gifts. Yet in the play, Starkodder's destiny is determined before he is born. The events following the verbal duel between the gods are all tragic: Storverk dies, while Sigurlin is taken away from the temple. Loke's vile act is explicitly referred to as a *nidverk*, most probably to bring to the fore a connection with Starkodder's similar conduct in the future. It is clear that Loke's only aim in joining together his son and Sigurlin is to make sure that a child is born out of a relationship between a giant and a prophetess of the temple of Baldr in order to secure the future of the lineage.

It is surely no coincidence that light is associated with Baldr and his temple, Baldr being endowed with traits that turn him into a Christ-like figure in the Old Norse mythographic tradition. Quite interestingly, the textual model adopted by Strindberg to build up the 'light dimension' of the scene is *Sólarljóð*, a poem which combines stylistic traditional elements of Old Norse poetry with strictly Christian contents and symbolism.¹⁵ Furthermore, he is also likely to

¹⁵ *Sólarljóð* is written in the *ljóðaháttr* and is usually dated to the thirteenth century. As Attwood (2005, 61) points out, 'it takes as its models both the gnomic or wisdom poems of the Poetic Edda, notably *Hávamál*, and European vision literature, particularly accounts of hell and the other world'. Strindberg's deep interest in *Sólarljóð* resulted in him quoting or paraphrasing various lines from it in other works such as *Folkungasagan*, *Engelbrekt* (1901), *Kronbruden* (*The Crown Bride*, 1902), and *Spöksonaten* (*The Ghost Sonata*, 1907); see Törnqvist 1996, 17.

have taken inspiration from Tegnér to give shape to his idea about the connection between light and Christianity.¹⁶ As regards the heathen component of the story, the prologue is full of references to eddic poems (especially to *Völuspá* and *Hávamál*), which Strindberg made extensive use of via August Arvid Afzelius's translation of the Poetic Edda, published in 1818 (Ollén 1996, 396). The first fragmented act presents some diverse characters: apart from Vikar, one finds the neighbours Hjalprek and Griper, both taken, in all likelihood, from *Gripisspá* and *Reginsmál*, and Gunlöd and Menglöd, daughters of Griper. Although a king's son, Vikar defines himself as 'trälars träl' (slave of slaves), since Hjalprek treats him as a slave. Starkodder is only mentioned in the intense dialogue between Menglöd and Vikar. The maiden is eager to learn about Starkodder and asks Vikar many questions about his foster-brother's origins and his physical appearance. The relationship between Vikar and Menglöd is clearly reminiscent of that between Stig and Veborg: Vikar is afraid of her because he thinks that she wants to control him. However, the fragmentary nature of the play is such as to make it extremely difficult to advance any hypothesis about how the story might have been developed further.

Concluding Remarks

The observations that have been presented so far lead us to formulate some concluding remarks about the questions raised at the outset of this essay, regarding why and how Strindberg chose to write two works centred around Starkaðr. It is safe to assert that Starkaðr was fascinating to Strindberg mainly because the hero's fate, so full of sorrow and grief, was determined by divine intervention, a notion that haunted the writer in the last few years of his literary activity, after the *Inferno* crisis. Furthermore, Starkaðr's destiny bears some striking similarities with Strindberg's own fate: the hero's suffering and sense of guilt as depicted in both texts examined here are probably meant to reflect Strindberg's own life. As Robinson points out,

history offers him a series of plots or scenarios through which he establishes the contours of his life [...] the stage of history affords a parallel series of fates, figurations of plot, and patterns of relationship, in which he continuously seeks to read his own life and locate himself. (Robinson 1990, 60)

¹⁶ On Tegnér's influence on Strindberg, see Etzler 1967.

This argument certainly applies to the case of Starkaðr, too. Although his story belongs to the legendary heritage of medieval Scandinavia and is imbued with mythological elements, it was clearly meant to illustrate, together with other stories in the collection *Nya svenska öden* (most notably, *Hildur Hörgabrud*, *Adelsö och Björkö*, and *Vikinga-Liv*), the prehistory of Sweden in pre-Christian times. In addition, the fact that Starkaðr is presented as a complex and extremely nuanced figure in the medieval sources certainly represented a further reason for Strindberg to write about him. Instead of choosing to reduce the complexity of Starkaðr, or to level out the contrasts to be found in different accounts, Strindberg sought to enhance and exploit the great potential of the hero's contradictory nature. This enabled him to articulate a discourse based on some major opposites, between good and evil, between Christianity and heathenism, between old and new, and between man and woman, to cite but a few (Svensson 1998, 319). Such oppositions need to be seen against the background of a superordinate mythic conflict 'mellan en primitiv, ursprunglig, "autokton" ras [...] och en senare, högre utvecklad men mindre ursprunglig ras' (between a primitive, original, and 'autochthonus' race [...] and a later, more highly developed but less original race), as Printz-Påhlson points out (1969, 438).

The mythopoetic process is realized by Strindberg according to two major principles: first, the redefinition of the genealogical relationships in order to enhance the helplessness of Starkaðr in deciding his own destiny; and second, the enhancement of the convergence with characters from world history in order to demonstrate the strength of the divine powers across time and beyond the borders of cultural differences. To attain his goal, Strindberg resorts to a variety of medieval sources, accessed either in the original, in translation, or through compendia such as Starbäck's, as well as to works of different times and origins. These sources are combined in such a way as to give shape to some sort of mosaic, made up of various tesserae. So to some extent Stig is a blend of Starkaðr, Hercules, Ahasverus, and Merlin (and, of course, of Strindberg himself). But Stig — and Starkodder, as far as we can say — is at the same time also closely connected to Sweden, as the setting of the whole story demonstrates. By narrating the fate of the legendary Starkaðr against a background of gloomy times and within a mythic frame, Strindberg also aimed to look into the development of Sweden from heathen times to Christian times, from the age of darkness to the age of light.

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