

¶ Boel Westin, *Strindberg, sagan och skriften*. Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Österlings Bokförlag Symposion, 1998, 310 Pp. 8 ill., svartvitt. ISBN 91-7139-377-3.

Strindberg's *Sagor* / Fairy Tales and his *sagospel* (fairy-tale plays) have been largely neglected by critics and Strindberg scholars alike. Westin believes that this neglect results from the tendency of critics and readers to inscribe a self-reflective, aggressive "Strindbergian code" into the *Sagor*. In other words, they have refused to see Strindberg's texts in relation to a "saga code" and have therefore misread them (20). Regarding it as an essentially un-Strindbergian genre, scholars have likewise ignored or slighted the *sagospel*, finding them interesting at best only to the extent that they can be said to foretoken the "modern" *vandringsdramer*: *Till Damaskus*, *Ett drömspel*

and *Stora landsvägen*. To remedy this critical blindspot, Westin sets out to give a new image of Strindberg, to show that “det finns i hans författarskap en stark och levande tro på sagan som en episk kraft” (12). Her other intention is to show in detail the different functions to which Strindberg puts the *saga* (i.e. the “folktale-fairy tale”) tradition in a wide variety of texts: “Vad jag undersöker är hur sagan får en litterär innebörd och betydelse: hur den poetiseras och förvandlas till levande litteratur” (16).

Westin’s critical method derives in part from the theories of structuralist narratologists like Vladimir Propp, Tzvetan Todorov, and Gérard Genette, but owes even more to the motif and folktale studies of Stith Thompson, Max Lüthi, Linda Dégh, and Volker Klotz. In addition to designating Old Norse narrative forms, the Swedish word *saga* applies broadly to a genre including a number of subgenres: the folktale, the fairy tale, the legend, the so-called *Kunstmärchen*, and the *äventyr*. Establishing the borders between these subgenres in order to assess Strindberg’s relation to this heterogenous tradition is an important part of Westin’s study. Strindberg’s concept of the *saga* is, as Westin shows, very broad and includes practically everything from legends to folktales and what one can characterize as the literary fairy tales (*eventyr*) of H.C. Andersen.

An important concept underlying Westin’s assessment of Strindberg’s relation to the *saga* tradition is what she calls “*Märchensplitter*” (or *sagosplitter*), a term she has borrowed from Klotz, but adapted to her own purposes. This concept of literary fragmentation enables her to use the high frequency of allusions and references to different types of *sagor*, *sagomotiv* and *sagogestalter* in texts that do not otherwise develop any specific relations to the folk and/or fairy tale genre (52) to prove that “sagens poetik spelar en mycket stor, för att inte säga avgörande, roll för Strindberg och han utvecklar tidigt en kärleksfull syn på denna heterogena form av genre som han i stort sett förblir trogen under hela sitt stora författarskap” (46). Among Strindberg’s favorite *sagor* were those about “Tummeliten” (Tom Thumb), “Blåskägg” (Bluebeard) and “Lilla Rosa och Långa Leda” (Little Rose and Big Briar). Westin gives telling examples to show how *Märchensplitter* functions in Strindberg texts not otherwise connected with the *saga* tradition. In *I hans bandet*, for example, he uses the story of Tummeliten to explain Inspector Borg’s longing to return to “den tid då

man var ett litet djur och älskade det onyttiga, det orimliga, det meningslösa". In *Till Damaskus*, he uses references to Blåskägg to illustrate The Stranger's desire to control The Lady. A particularly fruitful section of Chapter III is the one in which Westin unravels the significance that the "Spelar min lind" verse from "Lilla Rosa and Långa Leda" had for Strindberg as an expression of personal loss and longing (83).

Westin also identifies at the outset the three alliterating "key concepts" that have particular relevance to her study of Strindberg's place in the *saga* tradition: Phylogeny, féerie and fantasy. The first term, phylogeny, concerns the *saga's* relation to the child and to childhood; though the protagonists of all but one (Blåvinge) of Strindberg's *Sagor* are adults, Strindberg invariably connects his *saga* figures with children and childhood in order to express "ett människans urtillstånd - det fylogenetiska" (180). Thus, as in the case of Inspector Borg, the fairy tale functions as "en ingång till ett förlorat tillstånd av oskuld, sorglöshet och framför allt, till det stadium av prerationalitet där det är tillåtet att älska det som är onyttigt, orimligt och meningslöst" (74). The second key concept, the féerie, concerns the actual fairy tale form and its determination to alternate between a realistic and a fantastic course of events. The third key concept, fantasy, concerns not only the means of creating the fantastic or magical dimension in a work, but above all the way in which the characters in Strindberg's texts understand and interpret the experiences attributable to fantasy. The conclusion Westin draws from her application of these key concepts to Strindberg's literary practice is that:

I hans texter lever sagan som en berättelse i minnet av en fögängen tid och utgör ofta ett incitament för en akt av rekapitulation: genom upplevelsen av sagorna och deras berättelser genomgår människan sin fylogeni och genomlever förflutna utvecklingsskeden. I den processen är [...] själva tillägnelsen av de fantastiska händelser and skeenden som sagorna berättar om av essentiell betydelse. (28-29).

This sophisticated set of key concepts raises the interesting question of how Strindberg differs from other modern writers of fairy tales, like Selma Lagerlöf and H.C. Andersen.

Strindberg was an outspoken admirer of H.C. Andersen, whom he once likened to the mythical Orpheus, but the critical tradition has tended to regard him as nothing more than an Andersen epigone. In Chapter IV Westin takes issue with Vagn Børge's view (unchallenged since 1931) that Strindberg was an undeveloped Andersen. Whereas Andersen tended to view the experiential world as basically true, good, and beautiful, Strindberg held it to be fundamentally evil; therefore one must expect his *saga*-style to differ in important aspects from Andersen's. Unlike Andersen, Strindberg "sets" his *saga* texts like mosaics, fetching his small colored pieces from various traditions and genres - both from folk poetry and from the *Kunstmärchen* tradition to which Andersen belongs (112). Comparing Strindberg with another famous Swedish writer of fairy tales, Westin observes that whereas Selma Lagerlöf assumes the role of a "strukturskapande mottagare", Strindberg evokes the image of "den fritt och hänsynslöst skapande författaren" (55). This distinction points to what Westin considers Strindberg's real affinity with Andersen: in some of his *sagor* Strindberg attempted to follow Andersen in effecting a synthesis of poetry and fantasy and to create a form that enabled the writer of fairy tales to play an orphic role.

Westin finds that the characterizing feature both of Strindberg's *sagor* and of his *sagospel* is their alternation between different worlds or, as she prefers to call them, between different fictive dimensions: "Strindberg dramatiserar inom sagospelet sagan som en idé, eller snarare, som en fiktion inom fiktionen" (142). In his *dramatized* fairy tales, that is, in the *sagospel*, Strindberg achieves this alternation by means of the *changement à vue*, which facilitates a break with the play's "grundtid" and moves the protagonist into different dimensions of time and space: "Därmed skriver sagospelet in sig i sagans obständiga tidsfunktion ('Det var en gång') och kan utan att ge avkall på den sceniska illusionen röra sig mellan olika världar" (205). Strindberg's first *sagospel*, *Lycko-Pers resa*, is most firmly grounded in the narrative patterns of the fairy tale tradition: "konfrontationen mellan den lilla människans strävan efter kärlek och lycka och hennes begär efter njutning, rikedom och makt" (186). The movement in all of the *sagospel* pushes the protagonist to read and interpret *sagorna* in a new and more mature way in order to see reality in a new light, that is to "förbyta

drömmarna mot verkligheten” (148). The search for the lost child/children and the child as a savior figure are frequent motifs in Strindberg’s fairy tales and fairy tale plays.

Fairy tales, of course, not only legitimate, but invite fantasy. Westin finds, however, a significant difference between the working of fantasy in Strindberg’s early *sagospel* and that in his later *sagotexter*. For example, both Per and The Smith (in *Himmelrikets nycklar*) function partly in a real, partly in an unreal world; and each not only develops a relation to the fantastic events in the fairyland he visits, but both experience astonishment and terror (207-208). In late Strindberg texts, on the other hand, the protagonists have a completely different reaction to the fantastic: in *Ett drömspel*, for example, the lack of awe - not to mention astonishment - in the face of the absurd or the improbable is an essential feature of the play’s “grundstämning”. Westin finds the source of this changed attitude toward the fantastic in Strindberg’s *sagotexter* in his well-known concept of *skogssnufvism*, that is, in the protean quality of indistinctly perceived phenomena as the mind of the beholder struggles to discern their true identity. This way of apprehending reality is what Westin calls “sagans blick”, which “bygger på en perceptionell verkan som förmedlar en form of dubbelseende. Ur detta dubbelseende emanerar själva fantasin i texten” (219).

This insight provides the key Westin finds both to *Sagor* and to the late *sagospel*. The metaphor Strindberg uses in “I midsommartider”, most aptly describes his intention in *Sagor*: these stories are windows that distort reality “genom rutornas trolska spel med färger och former: de visar det som är ‘utanför, ibland förstorat, ibland förminskat’” (220). The events in these stories generally lead to some sort of renewal or change, that is, the protagonists undergo a transformation: “det är inom människan som den verkliga sagan utspelas” (223). By uncovering the *saga* codes in Strindberg’s whole *œuvre*, this book opens a new vein of ore we thought had been thoroughly mined. As Westin amply demonstrates, the *skogssnufvistic* perspective in Strindberg’s *sagotexter* “vilar på idén om perceptionens frigörelse: seendet, blicken och dess blandning ligger till grund för upplevelsen av det fantastiska” (247) and this kind of seeing, Strindberg believed, can lead to renewal, rebirth, moral amendment.

Westin's excellent book is carefully documented and contains a comprehensive bibliography both of Strindberg studies and of literature on folk-and fairy tale research. This is such an important book that one regrets the lack of a summary of its contents in either English or German so that Westin's findings would be - at least *in nuce* - available to a wider audience.

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