

Reshaping the Scandinavian Saga through Hybridity. *Thorgal*, an Anti-Mythological Hero

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1. A tale of two origins

In order to understand how the series manages to blend different traditions, it seems relevant to first establish the circumstances of its creation, literally at the convergence of two cultures. In 1976, Polish artist Gzregorz Rosinski, wishing to leave Poland, work and offer a better life to his family, meets the Belgian writer Jean Van Hamme. Despite the material difficulties and the ongoing censorship on the other side of the Iron Curtain, their collaboration takes root in a project that avoids the sensible contemporary context and turns to a medieval matter. Satisfying both Van-Hamme's love for the northern culture and Rosinski's expertise in the representation of big natural open spaces, the idea of *Thorgal* is born with the ambition to explore the Viking era from an external point of view, which provides more freedom in the approach of the subject.

Also, by doing so, the authors kind of reenact one of Belgium's cultural cornerstones. Indeed, following the recent birth of its nation, bathed in an ideal of Romanticism, nineteenth century Belgium needed to find its own culture through a singular identity capable to meet both the Roman and the Germanic traditions. From a literary aspect, this resulted in productions aimed at promoting the idea of a "mythe nordique" (or "Norse myth") which, even if it differs substantially from Norse mythology, has some of its roots in it, since Belgian's Germanic legacy stems from it. Though French-speaking, Jean Van Hamme is originally Flemish and outlines in a YouTube interview that "we are northern people, us Flemish". More precisely, the release of the first issue in 1980 comes at a moment when such hybrid identity is queried as unfit to conciliate both parts of the country, which actually leads to a lack of identity – or a non-identity.

This peculiar and problematic context transpires in the comics on many levels. The first and most obvious of them is the complex origin story of *Thorgal*. A crew of Vikings, lost in a storm and lured by a distant light, find a strange capsule on the shore. Inside lies a baby that the chief of the expedition, Leif Haraldson, sees as a sign of the gods. The discovered baby, literally presented as a beacon, not only reminds the origins of Moses, but also serves as a larger mythological palimpsest, since his adoptive father names him by the two Norse gods who put

him on his way: Thor, who sent him, and Aegir, his supposed father, giant of the moving and ever changing seas.

This particular scene comes from the seventh issue of the series, a three short-story flashback album dedicated to tell the childhood of the “*Enfant des étoiles*” (child from the stars). Each story enlightens a component of the generic hybridization of the story. The first one, from the scene I just talked about is drawn, appears to be the most realistic one, with a sense of historical accuracy in the depiction of the Northmen’s daily life and system of belief, inherent to Thorgal’s baptism. The second story adopts a more fantastic tone and narrate a heroic-fantasy like adventure in which young Thorgal confronts supernatural entities and overcomes them thanks to his foreign origins. In short, what distinguishes him plays a part in making him a hero. The third and last story completely adopts a science-fictional tone and tells the story of Thorgal’s parents and ancestors in a space-opera like adventure. Thorgal, in order to survive an intergalactic *coup*, is sent to Earth in a capsule by his parents... I think the parallel with one of the most famous contemporary myths is quite obvious...

This last tale also sheds doubt for the readership, since the first two issues of the series already revealed his origins to a quite surprised and distraught grown-up Thorgal. The main antagonist of the first two issues turns out to be one of the last survivors of a people that left Earth before what’s mentioned as a “Great Cataclysm”. This shift of genre (from heroic fantasy to science-fiction) impacts the aesthetic of the panels, which depict closeted darker spaces by using colors and geometrical shapes borrowed from the classics of science-fiction (just think of Kubrick’s *Space Odyssey*, which by the way also inspired the two authors in *Le Grand pouvoir du Chninkel*). It also reaffirms one of Norse mythology cornerstones, by acknowledging the idea of Ragnarök, the cyclical end of all things that leads to a new beginning. Moreover, a few examples demonstrate a wish by the artist to draw nearer to the traditional depictions of Norse mythology figures: Loki and Thor’s rare appearances are closer to the medieval illuminations than to the modern beauty standards; the same can be said about the elves, far from their depiction by the heroic-fantasy genre. Also, when telling the legend of Ragnarök, the comics illustrate it by a drawing that recalls without a doubt P. H. Arbo’s iconic painting.

How come that Thorgal seems surprised at hearing the story of his people if he had already learnt it in his childhood? The explanation is simple, for it introduces one of the series topics: to prevent the child from a burdensome destiny, his memory has been erased. This plot device is not to be considered as simple narrative convenience. Indeed, its repetition in the nineteenth issue, “*La Forteresse invisible*”, occurs following Thorgal’s own choice to set

himself and his family free from the tragic and obsessive wrath of the gods: for them to accept the erasure of Thorgal's name from their memory, he has to erase his memory himself. By losing his identity, the hero is allowed to begin a new life.

Such trajectory acts as a palimpsest, for the story of Thorgal evolves with each added layer. If hybridity can be observed in tonal or generic ruptures, it mostly acts as a creative force fueled by coexisting disparate elements¹. By mentioning some of its figures, gods and artifacts, the comics offers Norse mythology a new iteration and thus does not completely disqualify it. On the contrary, they appoint it as a referential background (Victor Hugo's "couleur locale") allowing cultural and mythological interpretations of events or even as occasional driving forces for the plot (for instance, Freya's rings act as McGuffins in the first issues). Thorgal's resilient journey to affirm his identity resides at the center of the story, hence bridging it to the model of the Scandinavian saga.

2. Reshaping the Saga: The Genre of the Saga

Though it comes from a long literary tradition and has evolved over several centuries, the model of the Scandinavian saga as perceived today takes its roots in the most prolific production of such texts, during the second half of the thirteenth century: the *Íslendingasögur*, or "Sagas of Icelanders", also known as the "family sagas". Mostly studied by Régis Boyer, this model usually examines the so-called "age of sagas" occurring during the catholic colonization period. The many texts, written in prose, recount the stories of great men, of historical figures whose destiny distinguishes them from others and highlight some national and identity qualities, from their birth until their death, without forgetting their ascendance and descendance. What really sets this production apart from similar projects in other cultures (for instance, the "chanson de geste") is the neutral, nearly documentary, tone of the narrative instance, preoccupied by recounting the life of great figures in a described specific daily context without adding any subjective commentary nor using a pathetic or epic tone: the epicness arises from the protagonist's deeds, not from a narrative or poetic amplification. Henceforth, the family sagas are not to be mistaken with *Fornaldarsögur*, the sagas of old times, more interested in reexploring and, in that way, reaffirming the *Eddas'* rich foundations of Norse culture and mythology.

¹ Budor, Geerts, p. 13.

As you may understand, the literary genre of the saga stands far from the contemporary acceptance of the term. The comics series of *Thorgal* manages to reconcile both the Icelandic saga with the antique one, and the traditional model of the genre with its serial modern understanding. Such an operation goes through a hybridization process, which stands at the foundation of the genre, since it's been forged during a period of cultural exchanges and interpenetrations.

In accordance with that model, what Van Hamme and Rosinski created follows the adventures of a man and his family, narrating the fate of his ancestors and continuing the stories of his children. The saga of Thorgal cares more for the story of a human, unable to comply to any of the purposes fate and society impose on him, and who reluctantly takes up arms in order to escape destiny and, create his own. Thorgal doesn't care about the stereotypical prophecies and motivations of the Viking tribes: gold, power, battle and honor don't appeal to him as much as a simple life with his wife and his children. His constant desire to erase his past and choose nature over society only reaffirms his status as a bastard and *scald*, the Scandinavian version of the "troubadour" that wards him off the idea of an honorable Viking: his history is his to write, which makes him a modern or even postmodern kind of hero.

Despite that heroisation process resulting from the individualistic norms as well as the science fiction and heroic-fantasy appeal of the period, the comics manages to assimilate the ancient model of the Icelandic saga. Indeed, it depicts a succession of adventures reminiscent of Greek tragedies, located in a distant past recreated and described with a certain accuracy regarding its culture and customs, its artisanship, its system of beliefs. Such desire of realism, also noticeable in the sidelining of any supernatural impulse, can be attributed to an aesthetic specific to Belgian's French speaking literature, which usually tends to favor a both creative and subversive range of a descriptive realistic narration², tainted by surrealistic, fantastic and mythological influences. These characteristics actually echo Boyer's definition of the saga: an adaptation of foreign literary models mixing epic, dramatic and narrative tonalities in order to tell the story of an extraordinary family in a historically accurate depiction of the period in which it occurs.

² Ecken, Jean-Claude, « Thorgal à la croisée des genres », *Cahiers BD*, 1986, pp. 20-22.

In that prospect, it comes as no surprise that the mythological matter only appears as a background, at least during the twenty-first issues that are mainly interested in the identity quest of the protagonist. Moreover, the references to the Norse myths serve the story as motifs and topics integrated to narrative arcs borrowed from other mythologies. For instance, Thorgal goes to Hell expecting to save his late wife and, unknowingly, has to leave someone behind him. The well-known Orphean frame incorporates Norse motifs, such as the Bifröst leading to Hell or the one that inhabits it, in a depiction combining the ideas of the Greek Fates and the Norse figure of Hel, daughter of Loki.

Despite the many mixed mythological impulses throughout the storylines, Thorgal most surely presents himself as an anti-mythological hero, who refuses to comply to any precast path. On the contrary, the everlasting reruns of his journey come nearer to the postmodern conception of a hero, who is denied any promise of either a happily ever after or a tragic death. Just like his identity, and like the seas from where his origin stems, his destiny can't be fixed nor concluded by a perfectly wrapped story. The plurality of perspectives combined with the irresolution of the character assure the ongoing development of the story. In that, the comics series falls within the resilient answer Belgian literature found to the deficit of identity that followed the two world wars and its erosion of the "mythe nordique". Also, it matches quite adequately the serial modality of comics production, which allows the decomposition in episodes, the multiplicity of storylines and the potentially infinite postponement of the ending.

Considering all of that, the notion seriality appears to connect the traditional definition of the saga to its contemporary pop understanding and, in the same time, it exports its legends and figures to an era in which they don't matter if not for their referential value and the scenery they lay, in a logic similar to the one operating in the sagas of Icelanders. The mythological material borrowed from the *Eddas* already carried less of a historical value than a legendary one, notably because of its metanarrative tonality. It is, thus, no surprising to witness a similar handling in an *oeuvre* that really manages to adapt the model of the saga and modernizes it to the standards of an age where heroes such as Superman or Thor are part of a new mythology, one that is built from comic strips and movies, closer and available to each and everyone who desires to confront paths in order to create one, instead of simply following one.