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# The Literary Mystery of the Icelandic Dracula

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Words by Valur Grettisson

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a book that needs no introduction. The vampire's cultural impact on the world is immense and the story has inspired writers and filmmakers for a century. And then there is, of course, *Twilight*.

But the odds are that if you ask an Icelander if they have read the book, they might have in fact read a completely different version. Unbeknownst to them, the original Icelandic translation of the book, called *Makt myrkranna*, or *Power of Darkness*, is a completely different story from Stoker's.

## **The vampire takeover**

The Icelandic version of the Count is much more political. Dracula is a fierce believer in Social Darwinism and what's more, he leads an international conspiracy that tries to overthrow Western democracy! The story is more erotic and if you're in a hurry, you're in luck, because it's also way shorter than the original.

Most Icelanders had no idea about this until a scholar from the Netherlands discovered it in 2014, although literary scholars in Iceland had previously suspected something was up. The Icelandic version of *Dracula* was translated by Valdimar Ásmundsson in 1900 and first published in a magazine called *Fjallkonan* (The Mountain Lady).

When literature researcher Hans Corneel de Roos read the book in Icelandic, he discovered that Valdimar hadn't merely translated *Dracula*, but had penned an entirely new version of the story, with new characters and a totally reworked plot.

## **What our translators do in the shadows**

This all raises some important questions. Firstly, what in the dark lord's name is going on? But more to the point, why did Valdimar choose to change his translation so much? The resulting tale is actually

similar to the story that we often see in the cinema. It's more streamlined, and as the author says in the preface, he more or less cut out things he didn't think mattered or found insignificant.

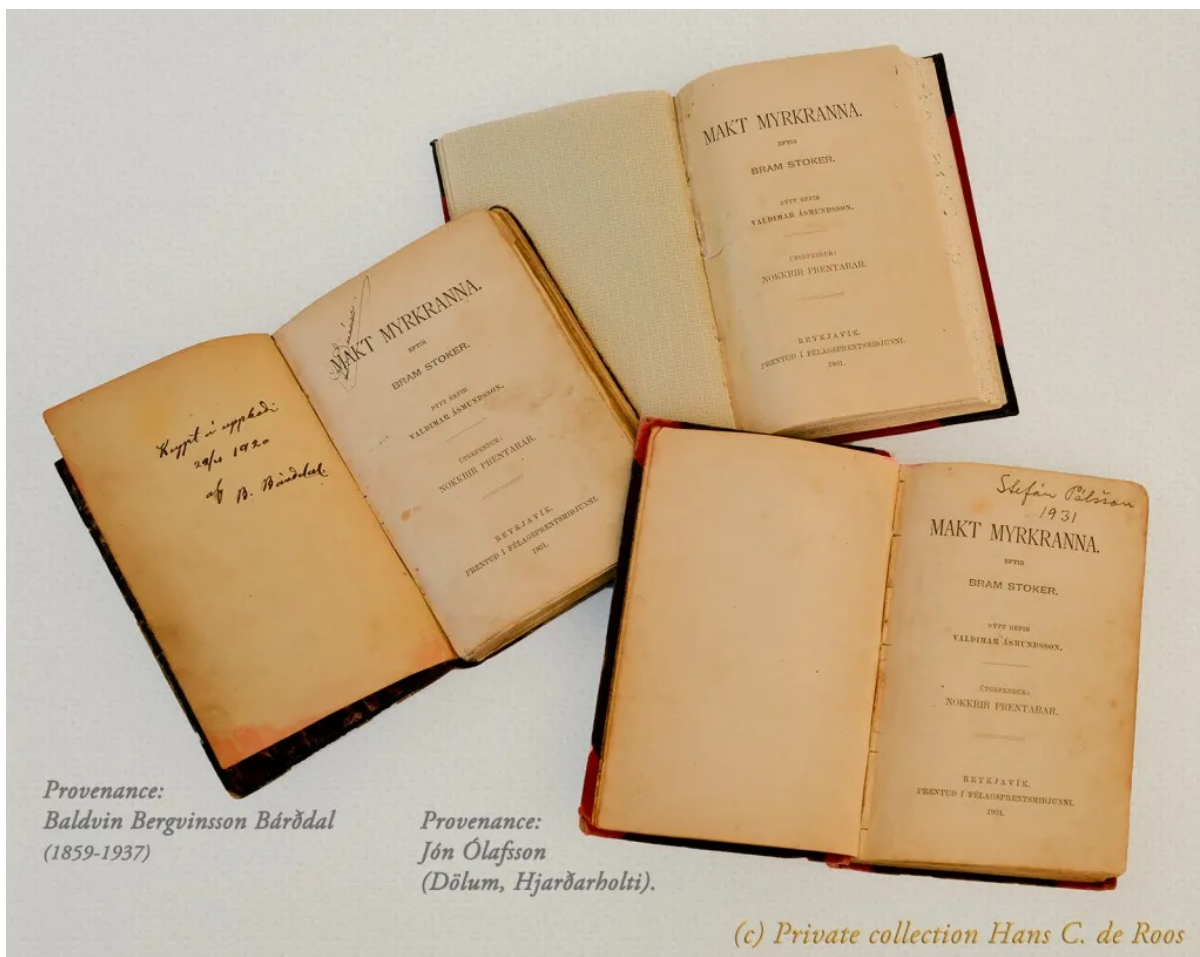
When the English translation of *Makt myrkranna* was released recently, Hans found out that this might even be more complicated than he thought. It turns out Valdimar's version shares a lot of similarities with another mysterious translation published in Sweden around the same time. We decided to contact Hans and ask the researcher about the Icelandic vampire, his findings, and where this rapidly-evolving literary mystery stands now.



## WHEN AND HOW DID YOU REALISE THAT *DRACULA* WAS DIFFERENT IN THE ICELANDIC TRANSLATION?

Around Christmas of 2013, I was preparing an article for the *Journal of Dracula Studies* about the claim in *Dracula* that the whole story was based on eyewitness reports. This claim is contained in the short note that introduces the British edition of 1897. But it is more strongly worded in the preface to *Makt myrkranna*, which was known to international readers through an English translation published by Richard Dalby in 1986. There were some phrases in this translation that sounded odd to me, however, so I wanted to check the original Icelandic text, from an authentic Icelandic source, not from Dalby's transcription. It was the Reykjavík Public Library that sent me a facsimile of the preface of the 1901 edition. I attempted to translate it, without any knowledge of Icelandic. During these efforts, I entered a line from this Icelandic preface into Google, and was very surprised that it was included, word for word, in the Timarit.is database. That is how I came across the serialisation of *Makt myrkranna* in the newspaper *Fjallkonan*, starting on January 13, 1900.

Until then, English-speaking scholars had always believed that the 1901 hardcover edition had been the first publication of this text, and that it was nothing but an abridged translation of Stoker's *Dracula*. But when I entered fragments of the Icelandic story into Google translate, I soon discovered names and scenes that did not occur in Stoker's text.



THE ICELANDIC VERSION IS SAID TO BE MORE EROTIC AND EVEN A BIT MORE POLITICAL. HOW SO, AND ARE THERE MORE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO BOOKS?

In Stoker's *Dracula*, Jonathan Harker has a brief encounter with three young vampire women and for a moment, he is tempted by them. But after the Count intervenes, he avoids and despises them. In *Makt myrkranna*, there is just a single vampire girl, but she has a much stronger and long-lasting erotic influence on him. He constantly longs to see her again but hides this desire from the Count. The description of her appearance is very sexualised. They meet frequently; she sits on Harker's lap and kisses him. Another erotic element is that the Count has a horde of apelike followers who perform sacrificial ceremonies in the basement of the castle. Harker witnesses three beautiful, almost naked girls who are led to a primitive altar as prisoners. One of them is bitten to death by the ogres. Harker also finds a denuded female victim outside the castle. And in the London section of the novel, Dr. Seward is seduced by the mysterious, dark-eyed Countess Ida Várkony, until he becomes her mental slave.

As for the political dimension, in *Makt myrkranna*, Count Dracula leads an international conspiracy that tries to overthrow Western democracy and establish a rule of the strongest. Many of his guests and followers are high-ranking diplomats. The Count's role as the leader of a clan of degenerated family members who do the actual biting and killing is not included in *Dracula* either. Then there are the massive modifications of the novel's structure. Harker's adventures at Castle Dracula take much more space, while the other parts are very condensed. The story ends in London, when Van Helsing and his men find the Count in his lair and terminate him—very much like in the later stage and movie versions.



AFTER YOUR BOOK *POWERS OF DARKNESS* WAS PUBLISHED, SCHOLARS FOUND THAT *MAKT MYRKRANNA* WAS BASED ON A SERIES OF TRANSLATIONS THAT WERE PUBLISHED IN SWEDISH NEWSPAPERS AND WAS CALLED *MÖRKRETS MAKTER* [WHICH ALSO TRANSLATES TO *POWER OF DARKNESS*].

Yes, that was a bit of a shock, but also very exciting. From the very start, I had been in touch with Ásgeir Jónsson from Reykjavík, the editor of the third Icelandic edition. Ásgeir believed that the Icelandic preface must have been translated from another language, as it sounded a bit odd and contained a newly invented Icelandic word for “Secret Police” — Iceland had no secret police around 1900. Later I checked this with a group of linguistic experts from Icelandic universities and the Árni Magnússon Institute, and they confirmed Ásgeir’s appraisal. For this reason, I assumed that there must have been an underlying English manuscript. I spent more than a year looking for a connection between Stoker and Ásmundsson.

There were many possibilities, but no definitive proof. Only after the English translation of *Powers of Darkness* had been released, fantasy specialist Rickard Berghorn from Sweden contacted me and pointed me to the Swedish *Mörkrets makter*, which means the same as *Makt myrkranna*. This was a surprise, because around the same time that I discovered the *Fjallkonan* serial, my colleague Simone Berni from Italy had visited libraries in Malmö and Stockholm to look for a Swedish *Dracula* variant — and found nothing. It turned out that the Swedish version had only been serialised in periodicals but never printed in book form; that is why Berni had not been able to locate it. And the few Swedish scholars familiar with *Mörkrets makter*, for their part, had never cared to inform international scholars of Gothic fiction that Sweden possessed its own national variant of *Dracula*. When the news was out, Icelandic literary scholar Guðni Elísson claimed that he had always suspected that *Makt myrkranna* had been translated from another Nordic language. But Elísson had never published his theory, so I never learned about it. In retrospect, it all makes sense, of course. But if my translation from Icelandic had not triggered so much international publicity, the world might still not know that *Mörkrets makter* even existed. In March 2017, I discovered that there were actually two different Swedish variants: a long version, with almost 270,000 words (much longer than Stoker’s *Dracula*), and a shorter variant, with only 106,000 words: shorter than *Dracula*, but still twice as long as the Icelandic version. From the narrative structure and the chapter titles, I concluded that Ásmundsson must have used the shorter Swedish variant, serialised in *Aftonbladets Halfvecko-Upplaga*.

HAVE YOU COMPARED THE STORIES, AND WHAT ARE THE KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THEM?

The plot and the characters are basically the same in the Icelandic and the two Swedish variants. But the longest of the Swedish texts, published in the newspaper *Dagen*, continues in diary style after the Transylvanian part, while the shorter version of *Mörkrets makter* switches to a conventional narrative style, just like *Makt myrkranna*. In the Icelandic adaptation, the post-Transylvanian chapters are so compressed that the narrative loses important detail, e.g. about the relationship between Dr. Seward and

Countess Ida Várkonyi. The erotic character and the political implications of the story can best be seen in the *Dagen* text, but sometimes it is a bit wordy. For the Icelandic publication, Ásmundsson replaced references about continental culture, especially about German romantic operas, with hints to Icelandic mediaeval literature, in which he was a specialist.

#### WAS BRAM STOKER HIMSELF EVER INVOLVED IN ANY OF THIS?

That is the million-dollar question. When I initially published about *Makt myrkranna* in February 2014, I was the first to present the possibility that the Icelandic story might be based on an earlier, unpublished draft of *Dracula*. I relied on Ásgeir's assessment that the preface sounded like a translation from another language, and I discovered a number of parallels between Stoker's early notes for *Dracula* and the Icelandic plot. But when it became evident that Ásmundsson had adapted a Swedish, not an English text, I started to seriously doubt Stoker's involvement. In spring 2018 I discovered that parts of the Swedish preface were plagiarised from the memoirs of a Stockholm priest, Bernhard Wadström, which had been released three months before the start of the *Dagen* serialisation in June 1899. As Stoker understood no Swedish, it is very improbable that he had committed this plagiarism himself. Neither do I believe that he would have authorised it. And if the preface was fabricated by the Swedish newspaper people, then the rest of the novel may have been pirated as well.

#### WHEN GOING THROUGH THE NORDIC VERSIONS OF *DRACULA*, IS THERE ANYTHING THAT WAS ADDED THAT TELLS US ABOUT HOW NORDIC PEOPLE WERE THINKING AT THAT TIME?

I guess that the erotic candour of the story fitted the Nordic character better than the British. Sweden had its "sedlighetsdebatten" [The morality debate] in the 1880s, criticising the double moral standards for men and women. In June 1890, Ásmundsson wrote an article about American culture and poked fun at a US law that prohibited American men to hang their underwear to dry in a place where an unsuspecting woman could see it. He also criticised the obstacles for breastfeeding in public. In *Mörkrets makter*, Vilma (Mina) travels to Hungary to conduct her own investigations; she is far more independent than in *Dracula*. Another important element is the critique of Social Darwinism, elitism and the rule of the strongest. Nordic societies have always been more egalitarian than Britain, and this was certainly true around 1900. In *Dracula*, Arthur is a typical aristocratic snob. In the Swedish version, he cares about the well-being of the working masses. And in the Icelandic adaptation, we have the additional references to the Nordic sagas, as mentioned.

## HOW SHOULD WE VIEW THIS ICELANDIC VERSION OF *DRACULA*? AS FAN FICTION? IS IT PERHAPS POSSIBLE TO VIEW THIS AS A NORDIC VERSION OF THE NOTORIOUS VAMPIRE?

The term “fan fiction” is modern; I don’t think that in 1900, anyone would understand this phenomenon. But yes, because international copyright laws were not in place yet in many countries, unauthorised adaptations may have been quite common. As far as *Dracula* goes, the Nordic variants are the first attempt to radically modify Stoker’s text. The Hungarian serialisation, starting on January 1, 1899, was a straight translation, and the first US serialisation of May-June 1899 simply replicates the text of the Constable edition—although with some omissions. Interesting is the fact that the Nordic variants did not copy Count Dracula’s remarks about the Icelandic *berserkers*. I always wondered why Ásmundsson had left this out—although this had already been done in the Swedish version he copied from.

## ARE THERE ANY STONES UNTURNED IN THIS INTERESTING LITERARY MYSTERY?

Yes, especially about the identity of the Swedish translator/editor. We still have no certainty, however in March 2017, I proposed that the pseudonym “A–e” might stand for Anders Albert Anderson-Edenberg, a senior journalist from Stockholm who was in touch with Harald Sohlman, the editor-in-chief of *Dagen* and *Aftonbladets Halfvecko-Upplaga*, where *Mörkrets makter* was serialised. I found some intriguing parallels between the Swedish novel and articles that Anderson-Edenberg had written earlier in his career. He also had used similar pen names, such as “A.E.” and “A.–E.” But as long as no relevant letters, contracts, diaries or memoirs from that period turn up, we will not know for sure.

The same goes for Stoker’s own role. Will Trimble from Chicago, who just published an English translation of the Swedish *Dagen* variant, established that in all cases he was able to check, *Mörkrets makter* echoes the last-minute changes to Stoker’s 1897 typescript. This shows that the Swedish text was almost certainly not derived from a pre-1897 draft version provided by Stoker. The plagiarism from Wadström’s memoirs also makes it implausible that Stoker authorised the Swedish initiative. But the debate will remain open as long as there is room for speculation. These Nordic versions will continue to intrigue scholars and *Dracula* fans for years to come.

[Illustrations supplied by Hans Corneel de Roos]