

REVIEW: *The Monster Specialist, or Severus and Lilava*, by Edward S. Louis (E. L. Ridsen). Illustrated by Anke Eißmann. Tales of Yore Series, no. 3. Walking Tree Publishers, 2014. Pp. 320. Paperback: \$24.30. ISBN 978-3-905703-23-8.

The adventures of Lilava and Severus will fascinate and delight those who read J. R. R. Tolkien with the kinds of attention his work rewards most richly, those who appreciate philological wit and profound fantasy teeming with applications for the modern world. In a select group of legitimate philologer fantasists inspired by Tolkien, author Edward S. Louis (known to the Internal Revenue Service as Edward Louis Ridsen) carries the torch of Tolkienian fantasy into places it widely evoked but seldom visited, such as the Arthurian cycle. Louis' fantasy romance is striated with the scholarly concerns of his alter ego, E. L. Ridsen: Anglo-Saxon humor, gnomic wisdom, epic epiphanies, *Beowulf*, its apocalyptic tenor, and its (mostly lame) filmic epigones, as well as Ridsen's groundbreaking work on the affinities between Tolkien, modernism and its discontents in the recent study *Tolkien's Intellectual Landscape* (McFarland, 2015). If Tolkien largely eschewed writers like Malory and Spenser, seeking in philology and fantasy the *fons et origo* of myths, no one is better situated to bridge Arthurian and Tolkienian worlds than Ridsen *qua* Louis. Indeed, the word *bridge* (PIE bhruH-, ON *brú*, OE *brycg*) is one of the many etymologies the novel playfully vets for Severus' cognomen "le Brewse."

The Monster Specialist begins in a breathless middle of things, an apparent last gasp, with its workaday hero suffocating in the coils of a wily old serpent. But as the chest cavity of Sir Severus le Brewse contracts his mind expands. Far from panic or frenzy, the specialist takes stock of the situation, finding time to chide himself for complacency in underestimating the beast, plotting a final stratagem before his air runs out, deciding at last on a simple, perfectly-timed nod of the helmet (like a turtle retreating into its shell) just as the serpent strikes—a tactic familiar from movie-land action heroes but nodding too towards *Beowulf*'s penchant for playing possum. Severely stunned by Sir Severus' headbutt, the dazed *wyrm* next suffers the neck bite it was poised to deliver. The hero's initial complacency, the dire embrace, and the fairly played turnabout recall the first canto of Spenser's *Faerie Queen* where the Redcrosse Knight sheepishly finds himself "wraopt in Errours endlesse traine" (I.1.18). Redcrosse only just manages to strangle the monster before she strangles him: native virtue, which Severus and Redcrosse possess in abundance, is necessary but not sufficient. Such heroes need a purpose, and that purpose in romances typically takes a feminine form.

At this early point in *The Monster Specialist* the errant Sir Severus notably lacks a version of the Una-figure there at his side. Luckily for him, he has already met such a woman, and even more luckily for him she possesses many of Una's virtues as well as Duessa's way with magic, though none of her duplicity. Her name, Lilava, seems calculated to encourage misleading first impressions—Lilith + Eve, little Eve—but the name more likely derives from Hebrew (AVA, like a bird) and/or Persian (AVA, voice), etymologies perhaps evoked as she attempts to console an inconsolable Guinevere: "Lilava begun softly to whistle bird calls, and then barely audibly she first hummed, then sang a slow, haunting, lilting tune" (166). Lilava is like Spenser's Una in that she comes to Arthur's court in search of a hero to kill the menace that has made a wasteland of her homeland, but her role as lover and guide in the hero's *bildungsroman* is drawn more broadly from the magical heroines of the Breton lais. Her knight is a man of many parts, but he bears the mark of the beast and shares with the monsters he spills or spares (according to the likelihood of their recidivism) the vexed moniker *agloeca*. Severus le Brewse lives out his inherited genetic predisposition as a bear's son, like Beowulf and Bödvar Bjarki, but his character arc is ultimately comic, not tragic, as he returns not once but twice from the "Paths of the Dead."

Severus le Brewse does seem to have a foot in a number of worlds, as the fourth chapter demonstrates brilliantly. Not having yet received his knighthood, he is a kind of youthful Beowulf in King Arthur's court, though he shows no talent at all for swimming. Called south from Hadrian's Wall to participate in a tournament, Severus badly oversteps his bounds, fighting recklessly against other youths. He blindly strikes Lancelot, stunning the crowd's darling and putting his own life in serious jeopardy. His mentor Sir Gareth later insists that he did nothing wrong, but takes him north to the Scottish Highlands to earn his knighthood against monsters rather than men. At the foot of Ben Nevis they kill a troll in a delightful mishmash of *The Hobbit* and *Beowulf*. The humor of Tolkien's dialect-speaking trolls is there; yet these trolls are already articulated stone, making them, like the rock trolls of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*, impervious to conventional weapons but vulnerable to drowning, which Severus, hyper-attuned to the elemental nature of monster combat, finally turns to his advantage. The death of this particular troll, however, leaves destitute its bitter, keening offspring, stirring echoes of the fatherless Grendel. The embittered child returns into its cave, incubating his hatred for human beings, to re-emerge much later, perhaps, full-grown and filled with not-so-motiveless malignity:

It spat a cloud of red dust at them, and with a terrible, painful, howling whine disappeared into the dark hole in the earth, and the cave entrance sealed behind it. . . .

(Gareth) "Did you take that awful sound to mean it won't attack or that it will not call others more terrifying than its lord to attack?"

(Severus) "Its parent."

(Gareth) "Oh. That other was its ...?"

(Severus) "Yes, sad, isn't it?" (45)

At least one of the film adaptations of the Old English poem, *Beowulf and Grendel*, imagines a similar revenge scenario as a prequel to Grendel's bloodthirsty raids. This version of a *Beowulf*, informed by the likes of René Girard and Julia Kristeva, should strike a chord with modern readers who prefer their monsters made rather than born, who know that even apparently "senseless" violence often has a backstory which renders it anything but "unthinkable."

The novel is divided into three parts, making for a compact fantasy trilogy of sorts. As part one develops, Severus falls victim to that most immortal of monsters: rumor. His towering achievements are diminished or rendered anonymous, his few peccadillos swollen to grotesque proportions, like the mutable menace *Fama* herself. This is one monster for which Severus has no patience, nor, of course, can he ever hope to defeat it...the newly dubbed knight sets sail for Ireland. Monsters, like Celtic peoples, have been pushed to the fringes of Britain, to the north and west. The scandal-mongering cesspool of the south holds real dangers, but not the sort against which even the resourceful Severus can prevail. The south also bears the indelible marks of history: the destiny of Arthur's Camelot. (Malory only mentions Severus a single time and to no particular purpose.) But there are better reasons for staying clear of King Arthur's court: Lancelot is there. Lancelot serves as the double of Severus, not his dark side, exactly; rather, they share the same dark side. They are *agloeca*: Severus bears the mark of the beast and Lancelot the mark of Cain—a distinction with little difference when their blood is up and the brute within holds sway. They seem hell-bent on a collision course which must perforce claim one or both their lives. In a chance encounter Severus ridiculously stumbles upon a quest meant for Lancelot. Later, they charge one another, and Lilava, ever vigilant, magically transports Lancelot far away, "probably to Scotland or Wales" (73). A good sorceress who makes a superb companion and a very good wife, sometimes reminiscent of Elizabeth Montgomery in *Bewitched*,

Lilava is coy and playful, indulgent and a cipher for the magic of feminine sexuality, even some of Lilava's spells seem designed for comic relief. Indeed, the heteroglossia of the novel mixes tragic vision and comic deflations with a deftness rare in modern Arthurian fiction. *The Monster Specialist* interweaves pathos and bathos, the sublime and the absurd in intricate tonal variations that recall the distinctive poetics of the Breton Lais.

Part one culminates in a battle against the Chimaera and an attempt to come to terms with the chimerical virtuality of the future. *This* Chimaera is more than a threefold beast; it is a shape-shifter that takes many forms, including that of a giant salamander, a pitiful dog, and boiling mist. Later the lovers encounter the hermit Ambrose in Corsica, who shows them versions of multiple, sad futures in a cloudy mirror. There are many ways to die, many reasons to despair. Both the Chimaera and the magic mirror are monsters of time, and the time for the lovers to return to Britain is fast approaching.

Fantasy juxtaposes, superimposes times and places. Severus and Lilava journeyed eastward to Sicily to battle the Chimaera, sailing back west they are shanghaied by the Witch King, Abracadabrax, and forced to do battle against Scylla and Charybdis. Mixing classicism and medievalism in this way, Louis stresses the interdependence and continuity of these two master discourses of the other. Later, honeymooning in Hispania, Lilava reads Virgil's tale of Dido and Aeneas while lounging on the beach as Severus swims in the ocean. He sees a vision of Guinevere, who siren-like begs him to rescue her, luring the weak swimmer farther and farther out to sea. Malingering, the two lovers have been seduced by the prospect of a private life; they must return to Britain and to war. Back at home, they find that things have declined rapidly in their absence.

In the form invented by Sir Walter Scott, the "historical" novel inserts fictional characters into an extant *récit*, such as the Third Crusade. The trick is to embed these invented characters deeply in what transpires without altering pre-determined outcomes. Such givens often work within historical fiction like *fatum* or *wyrd*, something already spoken or written. Yet the agency of invented characters adds a degree of the virtual to the past; in the penumbra of received accounts they shape lives for themselves free of the restraints that encumber their more famous counterparts. Lilava and Severus are prisoners as well as beneficiaries of this marginal existence. Fate assumes a chimerical array of forms in preserving itself intact, despite the determined efforts of the two lovers. Hurrying to Arthur's side to broker a peace between the king and his

greatest knight, Severus arrives too late to save Gawain and is forced into a duel with Lancelot, which leaves him mortally wounded. As the television series *11/22/63* on the Kennedy assassination has it: "the past pushes back." Fantasy pushes hard too, often in opposing directions. Lilava, Nimwe and the faery king hurry the wounded Severus "to the Other Lands" where they call his spirit back from the "Paths of the Dead," similar to the recovery of Frodo in Rivendell. With the Matter of Britain closed behind them, the elf king opens a Tolkienian prospect on the future: "And Arawn told them of growing Troubles, of strange energies and whisperings, of threats and thievery and sudden attacks in the Northern Forest, of strange creatures and portents along the coast to the west, and of strangers and spies in the east" (202). The dangers posed by the trickster/pirate Abracadabrax are no less dire than those of Sauron: a voracious, piratical capitalism has replaced an evil empire as the dominant threat.

The third and final part, "Lilava in Search of Severus," completes the comic trajectory of the novel. My brief treatment of it here contains significant spoilers so that readers sensitive to such things may want to stop now and read the novel before continuing. Although the lovers may have thought they were through with the Chimaera, it is not through with them. The monster has come west to the Northern Forest under the guidance of Abracadabrax, who hopes to turn its ravages to a profit, like many a war profiteer after him. As Severus confronts the Chimaera, drawing new power from the fertile land it lays waste, Lilava and a posse of elves rush to the hero's aid. Severus kills the Chimaera but is mortally wounded by its death throes. The elves inform Lilava that no one may return from the Paths of the Dead a second time, but she resolves to recover him again, determined to play Sir Orfeo to her lost Eurydice. Fortunately, neither looks backwards. They find themselves looking very far forward, indeed. On a hill in Cumbria above the M6 carriageway they reemerge, seeing first an enormous snake, along the coils of which rush strange new monsters: they are poised to begin their life among twenty-first-century readers.

No bare summary such as this one can do justice to the sweetness, humor and depth of this sparkling fantasy. Spending a day in the company of Severus, Lilava and their monsters has been a highlight of my summer. Now I want more...

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