

The Queen Is Dead... Finally

by JIM DAWSON

Conan the Barbarian #58-101
A Marvel Comic
Writer/Editor: Roy Thomas
Artist: John Buscema
Inker: Ernie Chan

The fact that Roy Thomas had to explain Bêlit's characterization in *Conan* #100, where he brought it back in line with Robert E. Howard's version, is perhaps the most telling evidence of how inappropriate Thomas's own attempts at characterizing Bêlit have been over the past four years. This also serves to indicate the manner in which he has handled other aspects of the saga.

Granted, Howard did not provide a wealth of background information on Bêlit. And, since Roy Thomas has expressed a desire to let Conan's life pass in real time, and since Conan supposedly hung around with Bêlit for two or three years, Roy needed *something* to fill up comic books with. Yet it is both ironic and sad that even though Roy's heart seemed to be in the right place, he fell far short of the mark in his efforts to provide Bêlit with a coherent past and believable motivations.

Throughout the ramblings of *Conan* #57-100 Bêlit was characterized as an impetuous child, whose two dimensions were "Damn the Stygians, gimme my crown" and "My barbarian, my Conan, my lover." The "Great Love" of Conan's life should not have been portrayed as someone the barbarian dealt with as if she were but a naughty, willful youngster. Conan's attitude toward Bêlit always wavered between bemused tolerance and smug condescension — and the book required more than just embarrassing scenes of Conan carting Bêlit off to the cabin of the Tigress to convince us that there was any Great Love involved here. Everything between the first encounter of Bêlit and Conan and their final episode on the Zarkheba River is left out of Howard's "Queen of the Black Coast," and Thomas would have done well to follow REH's example considering what he came up with to fill the gap.

Giving Bêlit a "reason" for her piracy is one questionable aspect of Thomas's work. Although this did provide a background for the

character, one has to wonder if it was an appropriate one. If Bêlit had been left as one who pirated for the mere sake of piracy instead of as one bent on returning to a throne elsewhere, might she have seemed a more savage and fitting mate for Conan? More importantly, if a shred of wildness had been left in Bêlit, perhaps Thomas would not have had to explain away Bêlit's cruelty in #100 by saying she had undergone a "subtle change."

It is also unlikely that the Black Corsairs would follow a "goddess" who obviously possessed no supernatural powers whatsoever to prove the claim, had no real qualities of leadership (temper tantrums don't count), and who seldom seemed able to escape any trap on her own.

Virtually the first thing Thomas did with Bêlit was have her kidnaped, something which pointed out just what sort of character (and relationship) was in the offing. The ensuing Conan-Tarzan face-off which gave Conan the name Amra was insulting and contrived, and a perfect example of the Roy Thomas Irony.

Thomas often puts things in *Conan* which are intended to be clever and interesting, but which come across as just plain dumb. In #60, for instance, Thomas has the Tigress sail past the Zarkheba River where Bêlit would eventually meet her death. Bêlit points it out to Conan, and says she will tell him more about it "later." Clever foreshadowing, right? Wrong. Since the Tigress is in no hurry to get anywhere, and since Bêlit's driving force is the pursuit of the treasure, and since she obviously knows the river's secret, why doesn't she sail up the Zarkheba River right away? Because Thomas had about three years' worth of comics to fill up, that's why.

Other examples of this syndrome include the two-page scene in #66 where soldiers exchange Brythonian (Polish) jokes. Thomas's ongoing transformation of modern-day clichés into Hyborian age clichés, or, more generally, the entire plotlines of issues like the King Kull Krossover and the "Lost Valley of Iskander" (with its famous "strange blue mist").

Some examples of Thomas's transplanted clichés: "Close, Valusian,

but no ring of gold!" (#68), "I'll not look closely at a gift stallion's teeth!" (#77), "...wild heron chase..." and "...peace-root..." (#85). "Nor is Bêlit the fabled shrinking lotus." (#90), etc. It does get tiresome.

Although it doesn't seem likely that Thomas let the Bêlit saga wander aimlessly from issue to issue with no definite scheme in mind, the downfall of the series is that the books read as if this were the case. Certainly, there was the overriding plot of Bêlit's desire to seize the throne of Asgalus — yet the sloppy, meandering way Thomas went about telling the over-long tale resulted in a confusing, inconsistent mess. Conan, Bêlit, and the largely faceless crowd of black corsairs got sidetracked so often as to make it doubtful if even the characters themselves, much less the readers, could keep track of where they were and why they were there from issue to issue. Roy seemed to wander off on tangents as they occurred to him, regardless of how believable (or necessary) they were to the central plotline.

For sheer offensiveness alone, the worst of these sidetracks was the Conan/Bêlit/Red Sonja/King Kull crossover. The only discernable motivation behind the creation of these issues was Marvel's desire to sell more copies of Red Sonja's book, both through unwarranted exposure and because readers had to buy *Red Sonja* #7 to follow the storyline. The storyline itself was not only silly, but featured a resolution which simply did not make sense. (Briefly, one sorcerer had given a jewel to Conan which he could not possibly have been able to summon up, since the plot required that *another* sorcerer be sole possessor of the necessary sorcerous incantation. Look it up. It's even worse than it sounds.)

Number 68 did contain one thing special, though—my choice for the prize of "Stupidest Dialogue Ever to Appear in a Serious Comic Book." To wit: Conan (after a sword blow of his hits King Kull on his crown): "Lucky for you that you wear your crown, eh Atlantean?" Kull: "Aye, Conan of Cimmeria—else your blow would have dislodged the fire jewel, if still it rested in my crown where it

should."

Compounding the awfulness of the whole affair was the fact that Buscema inked his own pencils on the story where all of the characters came together. Unfortunately, Buscema seems to be his own worst inker, and the result was atrocious. Which is to say it perfectly complemented the script.

Other unnecessary sidetracks included Conan's pointless flashbacks in #69 and the obviously hammered-in adaptations of "The Lost Valley of Iskander" and "Black Canaan" (#79-83), comics which also proved that even good artists such as Mayerik and Chaykin can be brought down to Buscema's level through inking by the likes of the Tribe and Ernie Chan. The "Beast-King of Abombi" series (#94-97) was another waste of time, in which Bêlit was kidnaped for the third time. Another cliché which Roy was overly fond of was having Conan and Bêlit fight each other under the influence of sorcery — we saw this device three times as well (#66, 72, and 93—and #89, if one counts a serpent-man disguised as Bêlit who fought Conan.)

In addition to those stories already mentioned, Thomas also adapted "The Thunder Rider," "Out of the Deep," "Marchers of Valhalla," "Sea-Woman," and "The People of the Black Coast" during the course of the Bêlit affair. Time after time, however, Thomas merely plucked out those elements of the various Howard tales which he felt were worth using and disregarded the rest, which I suppose is where the phrase "freely adapted" came from. Damned annoying, nevertheless—sort of like reading a condensed version of a botched plagiarism.

In a fitting conclusion to the Bêlit mess, Thomas even managed to leave out one of the most important pieces of dialogue for the "straight adaptation" of #100. During the dialogue about whether or not the gods are real in Howard's original, Conan says, "Let teachers and priests and philosophers brood over questions of reality and illusion. I know this: if life is illusion, then I am no less illusion, and being thus, the illusion is real to me. I live, I burn with life, I slay, and am content." In Thomas's adaptation, the first two sentences



are nowhere to be found — even though the illusory nature of Bêlit's later appearance reveals that those sentences express one of the story's major themes, and work to foreshadow the climax.

Ah, well — the queen, at least, is dead, and will thankfully only grace future pages of Conan as a wavy-

outlined memory. But the series did end on one good note. Conan #100 ended with Conan watching Bêlit sailing out to sea on a burning ship. The splash page of the next issue shows Conan holding a piece of meat over a fire and saying, "Bêlit..."

It is to laugh. ●