During my seventh-grade year at Kamehameha School in the early 1960s, the author Caroline Curtis would come to our classroom once a month and recount old legends of Hawai‘i. The stories she chose were about our ali‘i and akua, about men and women in love, about people who could transform into other living beings. She told us vivid and exciting stories about Hawaiians, and she made us feel a connection with those wondrous beings that inhabited these Islands. I do not remember her telling the story of Lā‘ieikawai, but it is the kind of story she would tell, and for a few minutes in an otherwise typically dreary day in school, my classmates and I were entranced.

When the venerable Martha Beckwith introduced her early twentieth-century translation of Lā‘ieikawai, she described the ways in which this tale had been transformed in its telling. Its ancient roots as ka‘ao, a spoken fable, distinguished it from the more historical mo‘olelo, but its first literary form, written by S. N. Hale‘ole in the 1860s, managed to retain the fundamental themes of Hawaiian storytelling: the interrelationships of Nature, gods, and human beings; the prominence of love and
physical attraction; the consequences of pettiness and betrayal; and above all, the overwhelming significance of family and relationships.

Dietrich Varez maintains these essential elements in this version. While the narrative is clearly meant to accompany the entrancingly beautiful prints for which he is famous, his story, much like the original kaʻao, focuses on those kinds of images that would captivate the mind of a child when told by a master storyteller. Just as the story in its oral form enables the listener to imagine these images through the inflections, emphases, and pauses of the storyteller, Varez’s illustrations make it possible for the reader to feel the dramatic beauty of the ʻāina and the people who loved and reveled in it.

Each version of the story of Lāʻieikawai has made the narrative accessible to new audiences. For readers who have never heard the story before, this book will stir them, as these stories have stirred their parents and ancestors, to treasure their Hawaiianess and to value those things about Hawaiʻi that distinguish this place and our people from everything and everyone else.

Jonathan Kay Kamakawiwoʻole Osorio
Honolulu, Hawaiʻi
This is an abridged retelling of S. N. Hale‘ole’s story *The Hawaiian Romance of Lā‘ieikawai*, first published in Hawaiian in 1863. A full-length English translation by Martha Beckwith appeared in 1919, and in 1997 a single volume with both Hawaiian and English versions of the legend finally became available.

The wonderful story of Lā‘ieikawai is a rare, full-length example of a *ka‘ao*, a story passed down orally for generations. With its many colorful characters, intricate plot, and ethnic detail, the story of Lā‘ieikawai rivals or even outshines many classic European folktales.

Accompanying this condensed English translation are new illustrations inspired by the wealth of unconventional imagery woven through this timeless tale of old Hawai‘i.

Dietrich Varez, 2003
The Legend of Lāʻieikawai