Middle Dutch Charlemagne Romances in *Olifant*

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The popular genre of the *chansons de geste* came to the Low Countries from France at an early stage. The oldest Middle Dutch texts, like the *Roelantslied*, the *Renout van Montalbaen*, and the Limburg *Aiol*, probably date back as far as the twelfth century. About twenty of the more than one hundred known *chansons de geste* have come down to us in Dutch. These were composed not in *laisses* but in rhyming couplets and do not, therefore, correspond to the French poems in form. Independent of the French epic tradition at the same time that it relies heavily upon it, Dutch chivalric literature is a striking example of the powerful way in which French culture radiated to the north. In most cases the Middle Dutch texts can be regarded as versions, though not literal translations, of their French counterparts. The inquiry into the true nature of the relations between the French and Dutch texts has been occupying Dutch specialists for more than a century and a half now.

This research is greatly hampered by the poor state of the Dutch tradition. Except for *Karel ende Elegast*, all Middle Dutch texts have been preserved in fragments only. Those fragments are often small, transmitted on accidentally preserved remnants of parchment which were used to strengthen old bindings. Examples of these are *Beerte metten breden voeten* (*Berte aux grans piés*), *Flovent, Gheraert van Viane, Ogier van Denemerken,* and *Willem van Oringen* (*Moniage Guillaume*). Slightly longer fragments have been preserved of *Aiol, Huge van Bordeeus, Madelgijs* (*Maugis*), *Renout van Montalbaen, Roelantslied*, and the *Roman der Lorreinen* (*Cycle des Lorrains*). In all of these cases, the contents of the stories have to be reconstructed with great difficulty by

comparing them with other versions of the same epic. Generally, these are French texts or sometimes also late printed prose versions in Dutch. Occasionally, we can even compare them with a completely preserved German translation of the Middle Dutch text. During this research the scholar is bound to feel like the archeologist who tries to get an idea of what once was a fascinating culture on the basis of a few broken remains.

The reliability of such investigations is, of course, relative, as scholars base their research on very small remnants and on comparisons with related remains in other languages. After all, even if the translator-adapter had a written source at his disposal, we can never compare his Middle Dutch version with the original text that he would have had in front of him. Instead we have to be content with one or more descendants of the first Middle Dutch version. Consequently, each time there is a difference between French and Dutch, the Dutch specialist has to wonder whether he is faced with a deliberate action by a translator or with an accidental scribal error.

In spite of all these problems, scholars are strongly attracted by the Middle Dutch Charlemagne romances. From the pioneering age of modern research in the first half of the nineteenth century onward, Dutch specialists have studied these scanty remains. Publications about the genre and editions of the texts regularly appear. It is worthwhile to present the results of this investigation to an international forum. We feel greatly privileged that we are being given the opportunity to do so in *Olifant.*

The entire project will consist of eighteen short articles written by specialists in the field. Most contributions deal with individual Dutch romances. These begin with a brief, representative passage taken from the romance under discussion followed by three sections. The first of these contains a brief summary of the story; the second contains factual information about dating, locating, and tradition; and the third section contains a discussion of the specific place of the Middle Dutch text in the international tradition. The most important specialist literature about the texts under discussion is referred to in notes. The series will be concluded by a number of general articles and a translation of *Karel ende*

Elegast. This special edition consists of six articles, three of which update contributions published in *Olifant* 19.3-4 (1994-95), pp. 143-76. The remaining twelve articles will appear in sets of three in upcoming issues through 2006. With this series of articles the readers of *Olifant* will be introduced to a significant group of epic texts, which have made the *matière de France* both well known and popular in Dutch.