Die waert sprac: “Dies ben ic wijs,
Want ic was te Parijs int stede,
Daer ic al die warede
Den goeden abt van Clongi
Horde vanden coninc vri
Zecgen vor die gemene stede:
Hoe hi Karels boodscap dede
Anden soudaen Gaudijs,
Dies men hem te vullen prijs
Nemmermee geven mach
Tote anden domesdach.
Ende hi es weder in Aragoen
Comen, die coninc coen,
Daer hi crone heeft ontfaan
Ende bringt gevangen den soudaen
Ende menigen heidijn.
Gebenedijt so moeti zijn
Ende alle diene ebben lief,
Ende toren ende grief
Alle die gone, diene haten!
Hi slacht wel boven maten
Sinen vader Saiwine!” (354-75)\textsuperscript{1}

\textsuperscript{1} Huge van Bordeus text is cited from Kalff’s Middelnederlandse epische fragmenten, pp. 221-249.
The innkeeper said, “This I know, because I was in Paris where I listened to the good abbot of Cluny publicly telling the whole truth about the noble king who conveyed Charlemagne’s message to sultan Gaudijs. Until Judgement Day one cannot praise him enough for doing so. The brave king has returned to Aragon where he was crowned, taking the sultan and many heathen with him as prisoners. Blessed are the king and the people who love him, but disaster and misfortune may strike everybody who hates him. He greatly resembles his father Saiwine.”

The innkeeper speaking in these lines is reacting to a request for information by the traitor Guweloen (Ganelon). Guweloen would like to know more about Huge of Bordeus (Huon de Bordeaux), eldest son of Duke Saiwine (Seguin de Bordeaux). Charlemagne has sent Huge on a special assignment to sultan Gaudijs of Babylonia. Judging from the quote, Huge has brought his mission to a favourable conclusion and has meanwhile returned from the East. It is unclear where the hero is at the time of the conversation between Guweloen and the innkeeper.

Huge is one of Charlemagne’s barons. One day he and his brother Gheraert are summoned to the court in Paris to serve the king. On their way to Paris the brothers are ambushed by traitors, among them Charlot, the son of Charlemagne. In the ensuing scrimmage Huge kills the king’s son, whom he fails to recognize because Charlot travels incognito. In Paris Huge is falsely accused of murder. A reconciliation with Charlemagne is only possible if Huge brings the following assignment to a satisfactory conclusion: he is ordered to travel to sultan Gaudijs (Gaudisse) in Babylonia. Upon his arrival he has to kiss the sultan’s daughter in public and demand Gaudijs’s beard and canine teeth.

Huge travels east, accompanied by a number of knights. Several people assist him on his adventurous journey. Two members of his family join his

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2 All translations from the Middle Dutch are the author’s.
company on the way: the mariner Gherijn and Aliames, who will help him in word and deed. In addition, the miraculous king Ebroen (Auberon) and his messenger Maleproen (Malabron) also help Huge. Ebroen gives Huge two magical objects: a grail that offers those who are without sins an unlimited supply of wine and a horn that may be used to summon the help of Ebroen in case of danger. After a series of adventures Huge reaches Babylonia and succeeds in carrying out his orders. He gains the love of Claremonde (Esclarmonde), Gaudij’s daughter, and takes the sultan prisoner. The journey home is not without its problems. Huge is shipwrecked and loses Claremonde and the rest of his company. He finds himself on a desert island, and only Maleproen will be able to rescue him. Maleproen brings Huge to the kingdom of Monbrant. Finally the members of the company gather again and return west.

Nothing seems to stand in the way of a reconciliation with Charlemagne, but again Huge becomes the victim of a treacherous conspiracy in which his brother Gheraert also participates. During Huge’s absence Gheraert has married the daughter of the traitor Ghibewaert (Gibouart) and has taken over the rule of Bordeaux. He refuses to relinquish his new power. The traitors try to prevent a reconciliation between the hero and Charlemagne. This attempt fails in the end. The plot is revealed and they have to pay for it with their lives.  

Details

Approximately 1500 partly damaged lines of the Middle Dutch Charlemagne romance *Huge van Bordeeuws* remain, written on eight remnants of parchment. That is not much at all if we consider that the length of the complete story probably equaled or even surpassed in length the French *chanson de geste*, which consists of more than 10,500 lines. The
length of the Dutch fragments varies from 3 to 400 lines. These fragments belong to four different manuscripts, all of them written in Flanders. The fragments have come down to us from the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth centuries. The romance itself probably dates from the beginning of the fourteenth century.\(^5\)

It may hardly be called coincidental that *Huge van Bordeus* was popular in Flanders. Stories about Charlemagne and his peers were in favour in this region that had cultural ties with Northern France, the area where *Huon de Bordeaux* enjoyed popularity. It is remarkable that we have no evidence that this *chanson de geste* was known in Southern France, Spain, or Italy.

In addition to the verse text, there is also a Dutch prose adaptation of *Huon de Bordeaux*. The oldest edition known to us dates from approximately 1540 and was printed by Willem Vorsterman in Antwerp. In total four different editions of this prose text are known to exist: two from the sixteenth and two from the seventeenth centuries. Only one copy of each print has survived.\(^6\) Although the prose text has come down to us as a whole, it differs considerably from the content of the verse romance.\(^7\) The Dutch prose text is largely similar to the French *chanson de geste*, albeit in an abridged form.

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\(^5\) For a description of the fragments plus references to the editions, see Kienhorst, *De handschriften van de Middelnederlandse ridderepiek*, vol. 1, pp. 70-75. Recently some fragments were made accessible for the first time in an edition by Kienhorst and Tersteeg (“De Brusselse en Nijmeegse fragmenten van *Huge van Bordeus*”).

\(^6\) For a description of the prose editions, see Besamusca’s *Repertorium*, pp. 32-36.

\(^7\) The prose text was published in the nineteenth century by F. Wolf (see Works Cited).
The Tradition

The Middle Dutch verse romance *Huge van Bordeus* is based on the French *Huon de Bordeaux* tradition, but the poet handled this tradition independently and creatively. The French tradition does not restrict itself merely to the story about Huge’s banishment. At the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, the original *chanson de geste* expanded into a complete series of narratives that also told the adventures of Huge’s offspring. The Middle Dutch poet has incorporated several elements from these sequels into his own story. In the case of his adaptation of *Huon de Bordeaux*, the poet copied the main events, but he developed and fitted them differently into his story and enriched them with new narrative elements. We encounter familiar elements in the Middle Dutch poem from the *Huon* story, for instance Charlemagne’s assignment, Huon’s journey to sultan Gaudisse of Babylonia, the encounter with king Auberon, Claremonde’s love, the fight against Agrapart, the shipwreck, and the encounter with the minstrel. In addition we meet new characters such as Jacke, Vulcanuut, Bengetijn van Burgale, Sathanas, and Ydonie and read about new events such as Huge’s disappearance into an enchanted castle, the attack on Guweloen, and Claremonde’s rescue by Maleproen. The result is a Middle Dutch version of the *Huon de Bordeaux* with a complex narrative structure that deviates considerably from the French tradition. We have every right to speak of a free adaptation of the French narrative material.

The surviving parts of the Middle Dutch poem differ so much from *Huon de Bordeaux* that it becomes highly problematic to look for parallels in the French story. This is the case, for instance, with the Middelburg fragments, quoted above. We have only one point of departure for a comparison with *Huon de Bordeaux*: the fragments should be situated somewhere in the last part of the French story, that is, after Huon’s return from the East. Moreover, like Huon, Huge and his men become victims of a

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8 In this context, see Lens, “Old French Epic Cycles in Ms. Turin L.II.14.”
conspiracy in which his brother Gheraert and his father-in-law Ghibewaert are probably accomplices. The other events described in these fragments cannot be found in Huon de Bordeaux or have been changed considerably.

Huon de Bordeaux presents a predominantly linear plot development (Rossi, Huon de Bordeaux, pp. 124-25). This is also the case in the part of the chanson de geste discussed here. Huon, Esclarmonde, and the knights have returned to France and are staying in an abbey just outside Bordeaux. Huon is not allowed to enter the town before he has visited Charlemagne in Paris with the evidence that he has carried out the king’s order. However, his brother Gérard, who has taken over the rule of Bordeaux in Huon’s absence, makes it impossible for him to do so, refusing to relinquish his power. Together with his treacherous father-in-law Gibouart, he ambushes Huon’s company. Huon is imprisoned in Bordeaux, thereby transgressing Charlemagne’s conditions. For that reason the king decides to have him sentenced again. Huon is only saved through the intervention of king Auberon, who appears as a deus ex machina in Bordeaux, and Charlemagne and his vassal are reconciled.

Unlike Huon de Bordeaux, the Middle Dutch text does not have a linear narrative structure. Applying the technique of interlace, the poet has woven a multitude of events and plot lines into a complex narrative structure. We are able to see this most clearly in the part of the story which has come down to us in the Middelburg fragments. Several story lines can be discerned here:

1) Huge. First and foremost, of course, there is the hero’s story, although he is not an active participant in the surviving lines. Other characters talk about him. From their stories we are able to gather that Huge has returned from the East in the company of several knights, the abbot of Cluny, and the captive heathen, among them the sultan Gaudijs. It is unclear whether Claremonde belongs to this company; her name is not mentioned. In any case Huge has been to Aragon taking the captive heathen with him. He turns out to be king of Aragon. As the burghers worry about his fate, Huge has not been to Bordeaux. They suffer under the reign of the perfidious Olifant.
Huge van Bordeus

Muelpas, whom Gheraert has appointed as temporary ruler. Huge and his company have been lured into an enchanted castle somewhere (its location is unclear) and they have disappeared.

Before this event took place the members of the company split up, causing the first plot line to branch off. The abbot of Cluny travels to Paris to inform the people there about Huge’s adventures. We hear this from the keeper of the inn where Guweloen spends the night. He tells Guweloen that he himself was in Paris when the abbot narrated the story about Huge’s return. We cannot be certain whether the abbot re-emerges in the story. Vulcuuut and his companion have also left Huge’s company. They stayed behind when the latter disappeared with castle and all. Thus a new plot line begins as Vulcuuut and his companion travel to Bordeaux to inform Huge’s friends and acquaintances about his fate and that of his men. They secretly stay with the innkeeper Jacke in Bordeaux.

In the surviving lines we also encounter a number of traitors who want to prevent Huge’s return to Bordeaux:

2) Guweloen. We follow the traitor Guweloen, who travels from Spain to his home in Hainault. On his journey he is attacked by the gang of the magician Grimuwaert but manages to escape. At this point the narrator interrupts Guweloen’s adventures and devotes his attention to the robbers who are investigating their catch. Whether Grimuwaert and his gang will re-emerge in the story is unclear. After this brief intermezzo we return to Guweloen. He takes up residence in an inn not far from Bordeaux, where the landlord provides him with information about Huge. Guweloen wants to know whether Huge is still alive. Apparently this is the case, since the landlord has listened to the Abbot of Cluny telling this story in Paris. Guweloen is far from happy with this news and informs his relatives. It is probable that he is an accomplice in Gheraert and Ghibewaert’s conspiracy, but we cannot be certain. As soon as Guweloen arrives in Hainault, this story line is interrupted and replaced by the story of Gheraert and Ghibewaert.
3) Gheraert and his father-in-law Ghibevaert. They spread false rumours in Bordeaux about the fate of Huge. The inhabitants of the town do not trust them. Gheraert withdraws to mourn Huge’s fate and appoints a traitor from Toledo as his substitute. During his absence, Vulcanuut and his companion secretly arrive in Bordeaux.

4) Vulcanuut and his companion. The narrator subsequently devotes his attention to these two individuals. They take up residence in an inn and talk to the landlord Jacke (who is not the same person as the landlord who was quoted talking to Guweloen). At the request of Vulcanuut, Jacke invites his friends and acquaintances to the inn to hear the news about Huge. When everybody has arrived Vulcanuut begins his account.

This is where the fragment breaks off, but it is not the end of the story. The various plot lines are far from finished at this point. It is clear that we have not reached a solution to the predicament in which Huge and his men find themselves. The manner in which the events in and around Bordeaux are constructed is too detailed and complex for such an early solution.

The way in which this plot is narrated leads one to suspect that the beginning of Huge van Bordeus must also have deviated strongly from the chanson de geste. In the first part of Huon de Bordeaux, the hero becomes the victim of the unknown traitor Amaury de Hautefeuille. The poet seems to have replaced this unknown French traitor with Guweloen (traitor par excellence) and his relatives. We may suspect (but that is all) that Guweloen was also involved in the first conspiracy, causing Huge to be banished by Charlemagne. It seems likely that in Huge van Bordeus a feud is going on, as is the case in the Lorreinen (Geste des Loherains).

The encounter between Huge and Maleproen on the island in the Red Sea, as narrated in the Leyden fragments, is an episode that has more in common with the French Huon tradition and is easier to trace in the story.9

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9 The Leyden fragments were published in the nineteenth century by J. Olifant
The Middle Dutch poem bears a resemblance to both the decasyllabic version of *Huon de Bordeaux* and the fifteenth-century alexandrine adaptation (ms. BN f. fr. 1451).

In the French story, Huon and Esclarmonde are washed ashore on a desert island after their ship has been wrecked in a storm. Shortly afterwards Esclarmonde is kidnapped by Saracens whose ship called in at the island. They abandon Huon who is then saved by Malabron. Auberon has given Malabron permission to carry Huon off the island. His magical objects are not returned to him. Huon has incurred Auberon’s wrath by sleeping with Esclarmonde against Auberon’s wishes and has to save his own skin. We also detect this general plot line in the Middle Dutch fragments. Here the hero also finds himself alone on a desert island and is rescued by Ebroen’s messenger, Maleproen, who carries him over the ocean. However, upon closer investigation this passage also turns out to differ considerably from *Huon de Bordeaux*.

It is striking that Huge wanders the island at length. The romance needs more than fifty lines to describe the circumstances of the hero. He desperately roams the island and sees no way out. He is thirsty, injures himself on bushes and thorns, and finds only some ripe fruit to eat. The island, dry and barren, is inhabited only by wild animals. Its paths are impassable. In this text the description of the island clearly has a symbolic value: it emphasizes the inner condition of the hero and is the externalization of this condition. He has to suffer for a sin he committed: he has transgressed Ebroen’s prohibition. He is a sinner who suffers agony on an island that Maleproen even describes as impure. By committing this sin, he has become an outcast, albeit temporarily. He no longer has possessions;

Verdam (see Works Cited).

10 The best representative of this version is the Tours manuscript. This text (including variants of other manuscripts) appears in Ruelle’s editions of *Huon de Bordeaux*.

11 This manuscript was partially edited by Roger Bertrand (see Works Cited). A complete edition of this manuscript has not been published.
he is naked and has lost his lover and friends. That is why he feels a savage
and why he is afraid of having to stay in this situation forever.

There is no description of the island in the French texts. They mention
only that the place is green. The fact that Huon is washed up on this desert
island as a consequence of his transgression has some symbolic value, but
the Middle Dutch text develops this theme much more clearly; nor does
Huon ramble at length around the island in the French text. In the
decasyllabic version, the Saracens leave the hero behind on the beach, tied
and blindfolded. In the alexandrine version, Huon is able to roam the island
freely, but again, a long description is absent here. Huon is looking for food
when Esclarmonde is kidnapped (the fragments and the alexandrine version
coincide here).

Another difference concerns Claremonde’s fate. In Huon de Bordeaux
the lovers wash up on the island together. Judging from Maleproen’s
account we may gather that this is not the case in the Middle Dutch version,
nor is Claremonde kidnapped by the Saracens. She lands on a rock which
protrudes into the sea. She feels so desperate that she intends to throw
herself into the water. However, when the Virgin Mary of Monseraet
appears before her, she refrains from doing so. Maleproen rescues her and
carries her to safety. He leaves her behind in order to get Huge off the
island. Remarkably enough Claremonde seems to suffer from the same kind
of desperation as Huon in the French alexandrine version. In this text Huon
feels so desperate about his situation that he intends to drown himself in the
sea. It is not a statue of the Virgin Mary that restrains him but Malabron,
who turns up at that particular moment to save him.

The inner condition of the French protagonists is not developed in quite
as much depth as that of the Middle Dutch characters. The aspects of sin
and atonement are present in Huon de Bordeaux, but they are not as
strongly emphasized as in Huge van Bordeus. It seems that in this text the
Christian aspect is foregrounded at the expense of the magical. This is
evident, among other things, from the words of Maleproen, explaining why
he swims in the sea black skinned. He has to atone for his sins, for he
declares:

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“Contrarie den gebode,
Die ons sijn geset van gode,
Leefdic op erterike.” (165-67)

“I was living in defiance of God’s commandments.”

He would have been doomed without Ebroen, and because Ebroen has preserved him from the fires of hell, Maleproen has become his messenger. In the French decasyllabic version, the relationship between Malabron and the fairy queen is that of liege and vassal (“je suis ses liges hon,” l. 5379). Why he has to atone for his sins is not mentioned. In the alexandrine version, Malabron’s explanation is most fantastic: he was born in Lieuternie (in fantasy land), and Auberon took him to Faerie (the fairy kingdom). Malabron is allowed to travel from one magical land to another, but as soon as he leaves the fairy kingdom, he turns into some kind of fish. Such a magical explanation does not go well with the Middle Dutch romance, in which Christian morality and symbolism play an important part.

Another striking and typical aspect of *Huge van Bordeus* is the way in which the poet informs his characters and his public about the events taking place in the story. The friends and acquaintances of Huge and his knights, for example, are in a state of suspense about their fate. The audience knows slightly more, namely, that Huge has returned from the East and has disappeared in an enchanted castle. The architect of this castle is probably the only one who knows where Huge really is at that particular moment. It may be that Gheraert and Ghibewaert know that Huge is still alive, but this is uncertain. Their behaviour puzzles both the burghers of Bordeaux and the audience. Then, at a secret meeting, Vulcanuut informs Huge’s friends and relatives about Huge’s return, which means that at least some of the burghers know what is going on. Gheraert and Ghibewaert do not know about his meeting; therefore, various characters possess partial knowledge. Some know more than others and sometimes consciously hide information or provide other people with the wrong kind of data; therefore, several people are hunting for information.

23.1
A related theme is that characters pretend to be something or somebody they are not. This aspect is also present in the French story, but in the Middle Dutch adaptation it is developed in more depth. Not only does it appear in the separate passages (Huon’s introduction to the minstrel, for instance), but the narrator also uses it throughout the story as a narrative instrument. By way of illustration we return to the episode from which the quote at the beginning of this article was taken. Guweloen is sharing a table with the innkeeper and his wife four days away from Bordeaux. He has not introduced himself yet. We are told that the landlord thinks that his guest is an important man. He complains to Guweloen about the latter’s relatives who are prowling around the region. The narrator presents us with Guweloen’s thoughts: it would not benefit him to reveal his identity, because the landlord and his wife do not think highly of his family. Guweloen does not speak his mind; he agrees with the landlord. He even says that Charlemagne would punish these people if he knew about their deeds. Guweloen is playing up to the landlord, wanting to draw him out about Huge, because he lacks the information that the landlord has, and this information is important to him. The audience knows more than the characters do, for instance, the identity of the guest at the inn, something the landlord is unaware of. The audience also knows that Huge is still alive, a fact unknown to Guweloen. The landlord has no knowledge of the identity of his guest, and Guweloen does not say what he is thinking. This information lends an extra dimension to the story and increases the tension.

Being a Middle Dutch chanson de geste, Huge van Bordeius is connected to the story world around Charlemagne, but the text also contains elements of the roman d’aventures. Whereas the French story is mainly narrated in a linear way, the Dutch poet used the interface technique to change this story into a romance with a complex narrative structure. Complexity characterizes both the content and the verse form itself: the sentences are long and have a rather complicated grammatical structure. In this verse form, the boundaries of sentences and verses often do not

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coincide. Both content and form point to a carefully worked out literary and written composition that demands quite a lot from the audience. 

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12 See Berg, “De Karelepiek. Van voorgedragen naar individueel gelezen literatuur.” In this article the author connects versification and form of reception.

13 The Dutch version of this article was translated into English by Christien Franken.
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