1. Introducing “or”

Probably the best known and still most widely read medieval knight’s tale of the Low Countries is *Karel ende Elegast*.¹ As is common in the Middle Ages, the written version of the tale (the best known dates from around 1350) builds from an older oral story. There is no question that the older oral variant was one out of many. We have testimony of different kinds of versions, ranging from epic tales to fairy tales and from prose to poetry, that have been found all over Europe.² In the particular Dutch version I am focusing on, Charlemagne is at the height of his power and is summoned, by an angel, to go out stealing. The angel has to repeat his request three times before Charles obeys. The latter gets dressed, takes his weapons, sneaks out of the castle and mounts his horse, plunging into the woods where he will meet a black knight. First thinking that he encounters the devil, Charles will soon learn that his adversary is one of his vassals, whom he had expelled for a trivial reason. Since he was banned, Elegast, as the vassal is called, lives the life of a robber, although it is ex-

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plicitly stated that, to his honour, he only robs the wealthy. This night, now, Charles and Elegast will go out stealing together.

In the story several moments of interruption play a decisive role, the status of which in relation to history is what concerns me. One such interruption can be found at the very beginning, when the angel summons Charles for the first time. Charles has just fallen asleep and is abruptly woken. This interruption on the level of action, or the *fabula*, takes place when the angel speaks as follows:

> … “Rise noble man.
> Dress yourself as quick as you can.
> Take your weapons and go out stealing,
> God ordered me to summon you,
> Who is lord in the empire of heaven,
> Or you lose your life and honour.”
> *(Karel ende Elegast, ll. 19-24)*

As one can see it is not just a matter of Charles being interrupted in the act of sleeping. The interrupting act is itself interrupted, for the angel speaks and then temporarily breaks off with: “God ordered me to summon you/Who is lord in the empire of heaven”. The “who” obviously refers to God, here, but grammatically it can also refer to “you”: Charles. The latter would then be lord of heaven. The resulting ambiguity is related to another one, concerning line 21 and 24. Taken together, these lines form the sentence: “Take your weapons and go out stealing/or you lose your life and honour”. That sentence may be puzzling for Charles or for the uninformed listener, since both will wonder why on earth a king should go out stealing. Still, the sentence itself is perfectly grammatical. Due to the interruption, however, the sentence becomes awkward rhythmically and semantically. The effect is that the “or” in line 24 turns into an icon for what is at stake. The flow of action is caught in a freeze that puts emphasis on the “or” as an alternative line of action and, consequently, a different history.

It would not be very difficult to argue that these interruptions are a sure sign of an oral text, in which a skilful story-teller might use all kinds of interjections. Indeed, throughout the text, moments of interruption occur that can be traced by means of a change in an ongoing rhythm and pace manifesting itself on the level of the action, on the level of telling, or

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3 All translations are mine, FWK. In the original the text is: “Ende seyde staet op edel man. / Doet haestelic v cleeder an / Wapent v ende vaert stelen. / God die hiet mi v beuelen / Die in hemelrike is here / Of ghi verliest lijf ende eere.”