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Ulrike Schenk. *Die mittelenglische Romanze zwischen Imitation und Innovation: Zur Dynamik einer Diskurstradition.* Münchener Universitätschriften 38. Frankfurt a. M.: Lang Edition, 2013, 422 pp., € 69.95.

This cogently argued and clearly structured study deals with an important question concerning the development of the linguistic and literary landscape in late medieval England: in how far did the emergence of the typically ‘English’ genre of the Middle English romances interact with and influence the use of the native vernacular in written contexts? As Ulrike Schenk correctly points out, the ‘provincial’ origin and transmission of this genre far away from a capital still dominated by French and Latin may have been one of the reasons for the sustained use of the vernacular in a written context. A second, equally weighty reason is the strong ‘oral’ element found in most Middle English romances. The vernacular, which carries strong associations with oral delivery and speech, cannot be used for the textualization of the story-matter without a preparatory process of adaptation and transformation. It is such a process that Ulrike Schenk discovers in the emergence of the genre of Middle English romance. In order to prove her claim, she has chosen two widely differing romances (*Havelok* and *Ywain and Gawain*) and provides an in-depth comparative analysis. The first part of her study, for which she is able to rely on a variety of studies that have explored these aspects, serves as a prolegomenon covering the intricate (and in the end insoluble) question of “Is there a genre of medieval romance?”, its relationship with neighbouring genres such as epic, lay or *chanson de geste*, and the multi-lingual framework of late medieval England.

The main bulk of the study, then, consists of a structured close reading and knowledgeable analysis of the two texts, their sources, and their adaptation in order to create a Middle English romance. Schenk identifies some key features, such as the prominent oral elements, exemplified by the embedded and institu-

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tionalized ‘minstrel voice’ with its evocation of a traditional and most likely purely fictitious oral-delivery framework, the alliterative formulae, the condensation and simplification of the plot and, especially in *Havelok*, an inscription of the action and location in the actual existing landscape.

The selection of two romances whose roots point into opposite directions – the *chanson de geste* and chronicle tradition for *Havelok*, the Continental courtly romance for *Ywain and Gawain* – allows the author to work out the transformational processes that are responsible for the development of the features considered characteristic for Middle English romances. Thus we see, on the one hand, a certain degree of literarization and rhetoric refinement of the originally non-literary source-material in *Havelok*, exemplified in the development of the ‘flat’ characters into literary protagonists who show at least early vestiges of complexity. On the other hand, we observe in *Ywain and Gawain* the re-oralization of the complex and sophisticatedly literary courtly romance by means of a streamlining of the plot-structure and by the addition of typically oral elements. These transformational processes effect an upgrading of the non-literary sources to a more literary form on the one hand, and a downgrading to ‘stage version level’ of the complex Continental courtly romances on the other – and are thus constitutive for the creation of a new major text type (or genre) that covers a middle ground and has an integrating function by reaching out to courtly as well as non-courtly audiences.

To sum up: Ulrike Schenk’s study provides an innovative approach that takes a literary genre as a means to analyze the development in the linguistic field and underpins her argument with solid text-based research. It is therefore to be hoped that she will promulgate her findings also in the form of papers in English since monographs in German tend to be ignored by English-speaking audiences.