



# The Old French Grail Romance - Perlesvaus: A Study of Its Principle Sources

*William Albert Nitze*

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From the INTRODUCTION.

The Old French romance, *Perlesvaus*, with which the following pages deal, was published in 1866 in conjunction with the *Perceval* of Crestien de Troyes. Since the date of its publication, the work has several times been the object of more or less fruitful discussion. The past investigation on the subject, however, has been limited merely to the bearing the romance has on questions relating to the Holy Grail. The *Perlesvaus*, it seems, has shared the fate of most Grail works in that its importance for the history of the Grail legend has for the time being overshadowed the interest in the work itself. While several permanent contributions have been made with respect to parts of the romance, there has been thus far no independent attempt to learn definitely the origin and the nature of the work.

The need then of a special study of the *Perlesvaus* will be readily admitted. Certainly, the romance is of sufficient importance as a Grail work to justify such an undertaking; moreover, aside from its connection with the Grail legend it possesses a peculiar interest as one of the earliest examples of French literary prose. Consequently, if the *Perlesvaus* is, as it has been held to be, chiefly a compilation from other contemporary works, the first step in the further study of it is to ascertain from what particular sources it was compiled. At the same time the question of the extent and nature of the indebtedness to these sources should be considered. It is with a view to the partial settlement of these two questions: the particular sources of the *Perlesvaus* and the relation of the romance to these sources, that the present study is made.

The previous studies dealing with the work serve as a starting-point for the investigation in hand. A review of this literature will be made in order to indicate the results thus far reached by writers on the subject and to determine what special points are still open to discussion. This method will define largely the course of the present study. As to the limits of the study, it was at first planned to take account of most of the sources of the *Perlesvaus*, the order in which the sources were to be treated being as far as possible according to their relative importance. That is, those works were to be considered first to which the *Perlesvaus* appeared to be most closely related; those were to be considered next with which it showed less connection; and so on, as its affinity with the works in question diminished. For so full a treatment, however, more time and space would have been necessary than could be given to the study. Accordingly the relationship of the romance only to its more important sources will be considered here.

The present inquiry, however, had necessarily to be preceded by an examination of the MSS. of the *Perlesvaus*. The modern edition of the romance was published by Potvin from a single MS. in the *Bibliothèque de Bourgogne* at Brussels, though variants were also given from a Bern MS. which contains two fragments of the work. Since the publication of Potvin's edition, however, five additional MSS. have come to light containing the *Perlesvaus* in some form or other; and in 1876 the Rev. Robert Williams edited a Welsh translation (with a Modern English rendition by himself) which M. Gaston Paris ascribes to a better French text than that of Potvin's MS. The necessity is thus apparent of considering first this additional MS. material before proceeding to the study of the work. Three of the MSS. unknown to Potvin (which are virtually two as the third is a late copy of the second) are in Paris, a fourth is in Chantilly, and a fifth at Oxford. The present writer has made a somewhat detailed examination of these MSS. and has also partially verified the Potvin text according to the Brussels MS.; the results of this examination will be found in the following pages.

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