

SKETCHES OF THE HISTORY
LITERATURE AND LEARNING
IN ENGLAND

FROM
THE NORMAN CONQUEST TO THE ACCESSION
OF ELIZABETH.

WITH SPECIMENS OF THE PRINCIPAL WRITERS.

BY GEO. L. CRAIK, M.A.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.—VOL. II.  
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BOOK III.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER.

THE Vision of Piers Ploughman is our earliest poetical work of any considerable extent that may still be read with pleasure; but not much of its attraction lies in its poetry. It interests us chiefly as rather a lively picture (which, however, would have been nearly as effective in prose) of much in the manners and general social condition of the time, and of the new spirit of opposition to old things which was then astir; partly, too, by the language and style, and as a monument of a peculiar species of versification. Langland, or whoever was the author, probably contributed by this great work to the advancement of his native tongue to a larger extent than he has had credit for. The grammatical forms of his English will be found to be very nearly, if not exactly, the same with those of Chaucer's; his vocabulary, if not equally extensive, has the same composite and diversified character; nor is his style much inferior in mere regularity and clearness. So long a work was not likely to have been undertaken except by one who felt himself to be in full possession of the language as it existed; the writer was no doubt prompted to engage in such a task in great part by his gift of ready expression; and he could not fail to gain additional fluency and skill in the course of the com-