

**GRAMMATICAL TREATISE ON THE
LANGUAGE OF WILLIAM LANGLAND
PRECEDED BY A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE
AND HIS POEM PIERS THE PLOWMAN;
INAUGURAL-DISSERTATION**

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Grammatical Treatise on the Language of William Langland Preceded by a Sketch of His Life and His Poem Piers the Plowman; Inaugural-Dissertation by Emil Bernard

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EMIL BERNARD

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WILLIAM LANGLAND

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Inaugural-Dissertation
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der philosophischen Facultät
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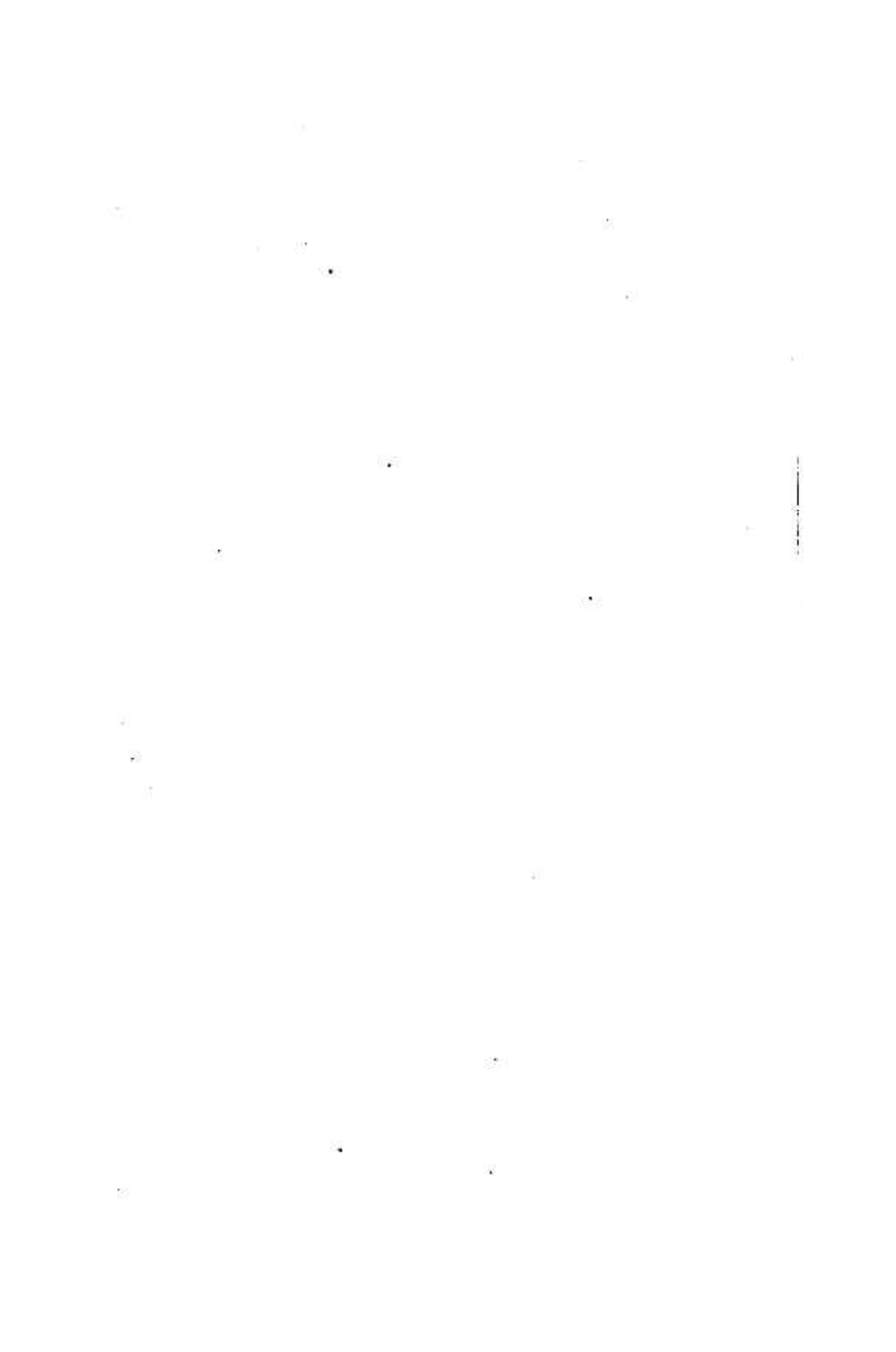
THIS TREATISE

IS

MOST RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED

BY

THE AUTHOR.



PREFACE.

William Langland, the author of the poem called "The Vision of Piers the Plowman," belongs to those poets who are nearly forgotten. His work, so very popular at the time of its appearance, is but little read nowadays; which is the more surprising, as this first original production of English Literature is invaluable as a specimen of that transitory period of the English Language. Considering Chaucer the father of English Literature, we ought not to forget that he himself did not despise to imitate our poet. Reading Chaucer's "Somptoures Tale," we are forcibly reminded of Langland's mendicants and friars, his monks and monasteries. The difficulties and obscurities of the language are fully balanced by the vigour and beauty of the poet's ideas, which not seldom reach to sublimity of conception. Besides, Langland is master of a natural satirical vein, for which he should be justly ranked amongst the first satirists.

The object of the following treatise is to give an insight into Langland's language from a *grammatical* point of view, and to show its relation to the Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French. Through the kindness of Professor Nic. Delius I have had the free use of Skeat's edition of Piers the Plowman, in the three Texts, a full description of which I have given in my Introduction. I take this opportunity of expressing my gratitude, and of giving him my heartiest thanks.

E. B.

INTRODUCTION.

The Norman conquest, important for the political as well as for the moral development of the English people, took place in the memorable year 1066. — To understand the influence which this great event exercised over the English Language, we must consider the state in which it was at that time.

The Anglo-Saxon, as a written language, existed no longer; Latin had completely supplanted it. The clergy, no longer able to enjoy the old Anglo-Saxon beauties in Verse and Prose, had soon laid aside Caedmon and its Paraphrase. When they spoke to their flocks, they availed themselves of the respective dialects of their Shires, the pure Anglo-Saxon tongue with its strict grammatical forms being already strange to the ear of the people. According to the tendency of all the languages of the Germanic stock, the Anglo-Saxon gradually lost its inflections, and the full sounding vowels. The language split into different dialects, all uniform in their inclination to throw off the grammatical inflections. So the Anglo-Saxon became restricted to the lower classes, for want of a literature to support it. The nobility adopted the French language, then flourishing in literature; French became the language of the court; French minstrels sang their lays in hall and castle. We need only recall to mind Edward the Confessor, who came to the throne in 1042; he had been brought up amongst his relations at the Norman Court; in fact, he was much more a Frenchman than an Englishman.

There is little doubt that he drew over a great number of the clergy and nobility, whom he appointed to offices in England.

Under these circumstances the Invasion of the Normans took place, which introduced with the Norman government an exclusively French administration. Although the foreign element was thus spreading, the Anglo-Saxon still lingered in the lower and unlearned classes. The amalgamation of the two languages was reserved to later times. A proof of this is the struggle of the Anglo-Saxon to revive itself by literary means, in the so-called Semi-Saxon. Thus we find the works of Layamon and Ormin, the first a translation of Wace's Brut, written about 1160; the second, a metrical paraphrase of Scripture, of a rather later date; both of which show that the language was still existing, though in a state of decay. The only possible and reasonable manner of reviving the language was through the new element. The coming time was one of mutual action and reaction. The Norman Conquest though not the real internal cause, precipitated and completed the metamorphosis in which the Anglo-Saxon language was implicated; besides, it enriched the language with a great number of words. Naturally enough, it was only in course of time that we find an approximation of the two nations, as well as of the nobility. This state was promulgated by the anti-gallican feeling which arose from the continual wars with France, and finally by the total separation of England from Normandy. A more flourishing period ensued; the dawn of the English Language broke. Schools were founded all over the country; the seminaries at Oxford and Cambridge were elevated to universities; philosophical, especially metaphysical, studies soon became favoured; Latin began to reassert its former power; historical and ecclesiastical productions appeared in great number. — But this vast development of intelligence amongst the people stimu-