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LITERATURE**

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Landmarks in French literature by Lytton Strachey

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CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I ORIGINS—THE MIDDLE AGES	7
II THE RENAISSANCE	20
III THE AGE OF TRANSITION	31
IV THE AGE OF LOUIS XIV	45
V THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY	94
VI THE ROMANTIC MOVEMENT	142
VII THE AGE OF CRITICISM	166
CONCLUSION	174
CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF AUTHORS AND THEIR PRINCIPAL WORKS	177
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE	183
INDEX	185

TO
J.M.S.

CHAPTER I
ORIGINS—THE MIDDLE AGES

WHEN the French nation gradually came into existence among the ruins of the Roman civilization in Gaul, a new language was at the same time slowly evolved. This language, in spite of the complex influences which went to the making of the nationality of France, was of a simple origin. With a very few exceptions, every word in the French vocabulary comes straight from the Latin. The influence of the pre-Roman Celts is almost imperceptible; while the number of words introduced by the Frankish conquerors amounts to no more than a few hundreds. Thus the French tongue presents a curious contrast to that of England. With us, the Saxon invaders obliterated nearly every trace of the Roman occupation; but though their language triumphed at first, it was eventually affected in the profoundest way by Latin influences; and the result has been that English literature bears in all its phases the imprint of a double origin. French literature, on the other hand, is absolutely homogeneous. How far this is an advantage or the reverse it would be difficult to say; but the important fact for the English reader to notice is that this great difference does exist between the French language and his own. The complex origin of the English tongue has enabled English writers to obtain those effects of diversity, of contrast, of imaginative strangeness, which have played such a dominating part in our literature. The genius of the French language, descended from its single Latin stock, has triumphed most in the contrary