

impertinent nor futile, and that the greater a poet is the more he "abides our question," let us go on to consider the principle on which Mr. Boas has built up his book. In his preface he says :

"What I have here aimed at is to discuss Shakspeare's works in relation to their sources, to throw light on their technique and general import, and to bring out some of their points of contact with the literature of their own and earlier times. Hence, in the opening chapters, I have sketched the rise of the English drama, and have briefly indicated Shakspeare's bond of kinship, not only with his immediate predecessors, but with the mediæval playwrights. And throughout the volume I have given greater prominence than has been usual to those features in his works which link them to the pre-Renaissance period."

Fortunately, for the reader, Mr. Boas has been better than his word. He has not insisted tiresomely on the connection between Shakspeare's plays and the mediæval drama which, after all, was very slight, and nowhere has he stamped himself as the slave of any particular theory. The theory of his preface is bettered by his practice in the book itself. The early chapters enumerate briefly and clearly the most striking features of the rise of drama in England. Miracle plays and moralities, the classical comedies after Plautus, the tragedies with "stately speeches and well-sounding phrases, climbing to the height of Seneca his style," all these are passed in review. Of the influence of the moralities Mr. Boas says :

"By this time (the sixteenth century) the Miracle Cycles and the Moralities were a mediæval survival amidst the surroundings of the Renaissance. By their very nature they were wanting in flexibility and power of adaptation to a novel environment; their decay was inevitable. But they

had done an all-important work. They had kept the theatre alive through centuries whose instinct was largely hostile to it. They had preserved and popularized the knowledge of stage conventions and technique. They had identified the drama with the national life and had ensured it against monopoly by a single class or school. They had based it on a moral foundation which, shaken by the tumultuous forces of the new age, was to be relaid deep and broad by the master-builder Shakspeare."

This allusion to Shakspeare's morality is developed later on into something of a theory. Mr. Boas takes the trouble to destroy the conjectures of a certain class of people, that Shakspeare led a very quiet and respectable life. To our mind it is impertinent to make a fuss about his practical attitude towards morality one way or the other. What is really important is his dramatic feeling about it. Although no one could accuse the "divine Will" of prudery, it is impossible not to notice that he never mixes vice and virtue in the perplexing fashion of other Elizabethans. In all the wide licence and variety of his forty plays, he never makes the forms of vice which most trouble and corrupt society triumphant. Mr. Boas does not give the prominence to this characteristic that Mr. Saintsbury did in "Elizabethan Literature," and his vague statement that the old religious plays had influence on the moral attitude of Shakspeare is hardly proved.

When Mr. Boas comes to the effect of the Renaissance on our dramatic literature, which was represented directly in the abortive attempt to introduce Senecan drama and indirectly in the spirit of Marlowe, in spite of his revolt against its models, he has much that is interesting to say. He shows how narrowly we escaped following slavishly where Italy led.