

MRS. BROWNING'S POEMS.

A fair criticism by a man, upon a woman's work, is at all times likely to be an invidious task; and it is one which demands for its full performance a two-fold range of sympathy. It demands the union, in mutual balance, of the masculine and feminine temperaments. A true conception of what criticism really is, will make this at once apparent. Excellence and defect are both *relative* terms, and criticism is the *judgment of relations*. The mind of the critic must be able to compare the impressions of all the varying aspects which the object of his judgment may assume; it must be able to compare their relations to other similar and dissimilar objects; and, above all, it must be able to place itself in the stand point of the author, to realize for itself his relations to surrounding influences, and to discern how far these relations of life have advanced or retarded his course. We can now see whence arises this complexity of qualification. The eye sees, not that which is before it, but that which it brings with it the power to see. And when the works of a woman, who unites in a rare degree the manly with the womanly characteristics, are under criticism, the exercise of a two-fold discernment is all that makes a fair criticism possible.

Our first business then is to ascertain the influences under which Mrs. Browning lived, and the circumstances which served not only to mould the form, but also to some considerable extent, to suggest the matter of her poems. The outward facts of her life are few. A rough chart of her education and mental growth might be drawn out of sentences scattered through her poems. She was born in London in 1809. Ten years after she was a writer, and at the age of seventeen she published her first volume—an Essay on Mind. It was written in the style of Pope's Essay on Man. Though her after judgment led her to withdraw it from print, yet viewed as the production of a girl of seventeen, it was acknowledged to indicate remarkable power. Her education took place under the oversight of her father, and in several passages she alludes to its nature. She was taught in all the branches of a boy's studies, not in that trivial way, and in those trivial subjects, which fritter away from girls' minds, now-a-days, all that they might by gift of nature possess of either delicateness or strength. "Hector in the garden" begins thus.

"Nine years old! The first of any
Seem the happiest years that come,
Yet when I was nine, I said
No such word!—I thought instead
That the Greeks had used as many
In besieging Ilium."

Few boys have got to their Iliad at nine years. Many passages in Aurora Leigh are to some extent autobiographical. I believe the following to be so.

"I read much. What my father taught before
From many a volume, Love re-emphasised
Upon the self same pages: Theophrast
Grew tender with the memory of his eyes,

"At la
masculine
be no que
next publ
Æschylus.
with her p
her "Dran
friendship
we find the
figure, with
—large, ter
She goes on
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