In the earlier sonnets he undertakes the half-playful defence of black beauty against the blonde Elizabethan ideal; but the greater number are in a more serious vein, and are filled with a deep consciousness of the bitterness of lustful passion and of the slavery of the soul to the body. The woman is a wanton. She has broken her bed-vow for Shakespeare, who on his side is forsworn in loving her; and she is doubly forsworn in proving faithless to him with other men. His reason condemns her, but his heart has not the power to throw off her tyranny. Her particular offence is that she, “ a woman coloured ill, ” has cast her snares not only upon him, but upon his friend, “ a man right fair,” who is his “ better angel,” and that thus his loss is double, in love and friendship. The longer series (i.-cxxvi.) is written to a man, appears to extend over a considerable period of time, and covers a wide range of sentiment. The person addressed is younger than Shakespeare, and of higher rank. He is lovely, and the son of a lovely mother, and has hair like the auburn buds of marjoram. The series falls into a number of groups, which are rarely separated by any sharp lines of demarcation. Perhaps the first group (i.-xvii.) is the most distinct of all. These sonnets are a prolonged exhortation by Shakespeare to his friend to marry and beget children. The friend is now on the top of happy hours, and should make haste, before the rose of beauty dies, to secure himself in his descendants against devouring time. In the next group (xviii.-xxv.) a much more personal note is struck, and the writer assumes the attitudes, at once of the poet whose genius is to be devoted to eternizing the beauty and the honour of his patron, and of the friend whose absorbing affection is always on the point of assuming an emotional colour indistinguishable from that of love. The con­sciousness of advancing years and that of a fortune which bars the triumph of public honour alike find their consolation in this affection. A period of absence (xxvi.-xxxii.) follows, in which the thought of friendship comes to remedy the daily labour of travel and the sorrows of a life that is “ in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes ” and filled with melancholy broodings over the past. Then (xxxiii.-xlii.) comes an estrangement. The friend has committed a sensual fault, which is at the same time a sin against friendship. He has been wooed by a woman loved by the poet, who deeply resents the treachery, but in the end forgives it, and bids the friend take all his loves, since all are included in the love that has been freely given him. It is difficult to escape the suggestion that this episode of the conflict between love and friendship is the same as that which inspired some of the “ dark woman ’’ sonnets. Another journey (xliii.-lii.) is again filled with thoughts of the friend, and its record is followed by a group of sonnets (liii.-lv.) in which the friend’s beauty and the immortality which this will find in the poet’s verse are especially dwelt upon. Once more there is a parting (lvi.-lxi.) and the poet waits as patiently as may be his friend’s return to him. Again (lxii.-lxv.) he looks to his verse to give the friend im­mortality. He is tired of the world, but his friend redeems it (lxvi.-lxviii.). Then rumours of some scandal against his friend (lxix.-lxx.) reach him, and he falls (lxxi.-lxxiv.) into gloomy thoughts of coming death. The friend, however, is still (lxxv.-lxxvii.) his argument; and he is perturbed (lxxviii.- lxxxvi.) by the appearance of a rival poet, who claims to be taught by spirits to write “ above a mortal pitch,’’ and with “ the proud full sail of his great verse’’ has already won the countenance of Shakespeare’s patron. There is another estrangement (lxxxvii.- xc.), and the poet, already crossed with the spite of fortune, is ready not only to acquiesce in the loss of friendship, but to find the fault in himself. The friend returns to him, but the relation is still clouded by doubts of his fidelity (xci.-xciii.) and by public rumours of his wantonness (xciv.-xcvi.). For a third time the poet is absent (xcvii.-xcix.) in summer and spring. Then comes an apparent interval, after which a love already three years old is renewed (c.-civ.), with even richer praises (cv.-cviii.). It is now the poet’s turn to offer apologies (cix.- cxii.) for offences against friendship and for some brand upon his name apparently due to the conditions of his profession. He is again absent (cxiii.) and again renews his protestations of the

imperishability of love (cxiv.-cxvi.) and of his own unworthiness (cxvii.-cxxi.), for which his only excuse is in the fact that the friend was once unkind. If the friend has suffered as Shakespeare suffered, he has “ passed a hell of time." The series closes with a group (cxxii.-cxxv.) in which love is pitted against time; and an *envoi,* not in sonnet form, warns the “ lovely boy ” that in the end nature must render up her treasure.

Such an analysis can give no adequate idea of the qualities in these sonnets, whereby the appeal of universal poetry is built up on a basis of intimate self-revelation. The human document is so legible, and at the same time so incomplete, that it is easy to understand the strenuous efforts which have been made to throw further light upon it by tracing the identities of those other personalities, the man and the woman, through his relations to whom the poet was brought to so fiery an ordeal of soul, and even to the borders of self-abasement. It must be added that the search has, as a rule, been conducted with more ingenuity than judgment. It has generally started from the terms of a somewhat mysterious dedication prefixed by the publisher Thomas Thorpe to the volume of 1609. This runs as follows:— “ To the onlie begetter of these insuing sonnets Mr W. H. all happinesse and that eternitie promised by our ever-living poet wisheth the well-wishing adventurer in setting forth T. T.” The natural interpretation of this is that the inspirer or “ begetter ” of the sonnets bore the initials W. H.; and contemporary history has accordingly been ran­sacked to find a W. H. whose age and circumstances might conceivably fit the conditions of the problem which the sonnets present. It is perhaps a want of historical perspective which has led to the centring of controversy around two names belonging to the highest ranks of the Elizabethan nobility, those of Henry Wriothesley, earl of Southampton, and William Herbert, earl of Pembroke. There is somë evidence to connect Shakespeare with both of these. To Southampton he dedicated *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 and *The Rape of Lucrece* in 1594, and the story that he received a gift of no less than ₤1000 from the earl is recorded by Rowe. His acquaintance with Pembroke can only be inferred from the statement of Heminge and Condell in their preface to the First Folio of the plays, that Pembroke and his brother Montgomery had “ prosequuted both them and their Authour living, with so much favour.’’ The personal beauty of the rival claimants and of their mothers, their amours and the attempts of their families to persuade them to marry, their relations to poets and actors, and all other points in their biographies which do or do not fit in with the indications of the sonnets, have been canvassed with great spirit and some erudition, but with no very conclusive result. It is in Pembroke’s favour that his initials were in fact W. H., whereas Southampton’s can only be turned into W. H. by a process of metathesis; and his champions have certainly been more successful than South­ampton’s in producing a dark woman, a certain Mary Fitton, who was a mistress of Pembroke’s, and was in consequence dismissed in disgrace from her post of maid of honour to Elizabeth. Unfortunately, the balance of evidence is in favour of her having been blonde, and not “ black.’’ Moreover, a careful investiga­tion of the sonnets, as regards their style and their relation to the plays, renders it almost impossible on chronological grounds that Pembroke can have been their subject. He was bom on the 9th of April 1580, and was therefore much younger than South­ampton, who was bom on the 6th of October 1573. The earliest sonnets postulate a marriageable youth, certainly not younger than eighteen, an age which Southampton reached in the autumn of 1591 and Pembroke in the spring of 1598. The writing of the sonnets may have extended over several years, but it is impossible to doubt that as a whole it is to the years 1593-1598 rather than to the years 1598-1603 that they belong. There is not, indeed, much external evidence available. Francis Meres in his *Palladis Tamia* of 1598 mentions Shakespeare’s “ sugred sonnets among his private friends,"@@1 but this allusion might come as well at

@@@1 “ The sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey- tongued Shakespeare, witness his *Venus and Adonis,* his *Lucrece,* his sugred sonnets among his private friends.”