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OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

The Complete Sonnets
and Poems

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- 2 **or none, or few** Some editors remove Q's comma in order to produce a straight choice ('either none or few'). Q's punctuation creates the effect of a searching eye, which sees first no leaves and then a few reminders of past luxuriance.
- 3 **against** in anticipation of; also perhaps 'in opposition to'
- 4 **Bare ruined choirs** Malone's emendation of Q's 'Bare rn'wed quiers' is substantively a modernization of Benson's 'Bare ruin'd quires'. *Choirs* refers to 'That part of a church appropriated to the singers; *spec.* the part eastward of the nave, in which the services are performed' (*OED* 2a). The comparison depends primarily on the fact that singing once went on both in the trees and in the choirs, but may be reinforced by the visual similarity between the silhouette of a bare tree and of the ruined framework of Gothic tracery. Q's 'quiers' may also distantly suggest 'quires' of paper, a sense activated both by *yellow leaves* in l. 2 (cf. 17.9) and by the disparaging remarks on Shakespeare's own works with which the previous sonnet ends. The passage invites comparison with *Cymbeline* 3.3.42-3: 'Our cage | We make a choir, as doth the prisoned bird'.
- 4 **where late the sweet birds sang** The phrase applies simultaneously to the trees (once filled with birds) and to the *ruined*

choirs, once filled with a singing choir. It is also possible that, on the narrower time-scale implied by *late* (recently), birds used to sing on the ruins. The effect is of both recent and longer-term abandonment.

- 6 **fadeth** The subject is *such day*, but as sunset also fades in the west *day* may seem for a moment to be a hanging subject, left deprived of the activity of a verb.
- 7 **Which** The antecedent is *twilight*, but a reader might for a moment see *day*, and even *west*, as possible alternatives. This grammatical uncertainty widens the sway of night, which seems at once to absorb twilight, the day, sunset, and even perhaps the west.
- 8 **Death's second self** is a conventional representation of sleep.
seals up (a) encloses, as in a coffin, and marks with a seal to prevent unauthorized opening; (b) 'seals up' as a falconer stitches up the eyes of a hawk, as in *Macbeth* 3.2.47-8: 'Come, seeling night, | Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day'.
- 12 **Consumed with** choked by (ash). Cf. 1.5-7. The third quatrain eases the poem towards total darkness: *autumn*, then *twilight*, then the final stages of a day as a fire is allowed to choke itself in ash.
- 14 **that the poet**; also *life leave forgo*; the sense 'depart from' is also in play

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That time of year thou mayst in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
 Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
 Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang. 5
 In me thou seest the twilight of such day
 As after sunset fadeth in the west,
 Which by and by black night doth take away,
 Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
 In me thou seest the glowing of such fire 10
 That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
 As the death-bed whereon it must expire,
 Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
 This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
 To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

4 Bare ruined choirs| MALONE; Bare rn'wd quiers Q; Bare ruin'd quires BENSON; Barren'd of quires CAPELL.