Sonnet 116: Let me not to the marriage of true minds

By William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov'd,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

This sonnet attempts to define love, by telling both what it is and is not. In the first quatrain, the speaker says that love—"the marriage of true minds"—is perfect and unchanging; it does not "admit impediments," and it does not change when it find changes in the loved one. In the second quatrain, the speaker tells what love is through a metaphor: a guiding star to lost ships ("wand'ring barks") that is not susceptible to storms (it "looks on tempests and is never shaken"). In the third quatrain, the speaker again describes what love is not: it is not susceptible to time. Though beauty fades in time as rosy lips and cheeks come within "his bending sickle's compass," love does not change with hours and weeks: instead, it "bears it out ev'n to the edge of doom." In the couplet, the speaker attests to his certainty that love is as he says: if his statements can be proved to be error, he declares, he must never have written a word, and no man can ever have been in love.

Read a translation of Sonnet 116 →

Commentary

Along with Sonnets 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?") and 130 ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"), Sonnet 116 is one of the most famous poems in the entire sequence. The definition of love that it provides is among the most often quoted and anthologized in the poetic

canon. Essentially, this sonnet presents the extreme ideal of romantic love: it never changes, it never fades, it outlasts death and admits no flaw. What is more, it insists that this ideal is the only love that can be called "true"—if love is mortal, changing, or impermanent, the speaker writes, then no man *ever* loved. The basic division of this poem's argument into the various parts of the sonnet form is extremely simple: the first quatrain says what love is not (changeable), the second quatrain says what it is (a fixed guiding star unshaken by tempests), the third quatrain says more specifically what it is not ("time's fool"—that is, subject to change in the passage of time), and the couplet announces the speaker's certainty. What gives this poem its rhetorical and emotional power is not its complexity; rather, it is the force of its linguistic and emotional conviction.

The language of Sonnet 116 is not remarkable for its imagery or metaphoric range. In fact, its imagery, particularly in the third quatrain (time wielding a sickle that ravages beauty's rosy lips and cheeks), is rather standard within the sonnets, and its major metaphor (love as a guiding star) is hardly startling in its originality. But the language *is* extraordinary in that it frames its discussion of the passion of love within a very restrained, very intensely disciplined rhetorical structure. With a masterful control of rhythm and variation of tone—the heavy balance of "Love's not time's fool" to open the third quatrain; the declamatory "O no" to begin the second—the speaker makes an almost legalistic argument for the eternal passion of love, and the result is that the passion seems stronger and more urgent for the restraint in the speaker's tone.

Although in former times this sonnet was almost universally read as a paean to ideal and eternal love, with which all readers could easily identify, adding their own dream of perfection to what they found within it, modern criticism makes it possible to look beneath the idealism and to see some hints of a world which is perhaps slightly more disturbed than the poet pretends. In the first place it is important to see that the sonnet belongs in this place, sandwiched between three which discuss the philosophical question of how love deceives both eye and mind and judgement, and is then followed by four others which attempt to excuse the poet's own unfaithfulness and betrayal of the beloved. Set in such a context it does of course make it appear even more like a battered sea-mark which nevetheless rises above the waves of destruction, for it

confronts all the vicissitudes that have afflicted the course of the love described in these sonnets, and declares that, in the final analysis, they are of no account.

In addition, despite the idealism, there is an undercurrent of subversion which permeates all. It is ironic that a poem as famous as this should be seized on by the establishment as a declaration of their view of what love should be. Does the establishment view take account of the fact that this is a love poem written by a man to another man, and that the one impediment to their marriage is precisely that, for no church of the time, or scarcely even today, permits a man to marry a man? It is useless to object that Shakespeare is here talking of the marriage of true minds, for the language inevitably draws us to the Christain marriage service and its accompanying ceremonies, and that is a ceremony designed specifically to marry two people, not two abstract Platonic ideals which have decided to be wed. It is almost as if the exclamation 'Oh No!' in the second quatrain is a recognition of this one great impediment that overhangs all others 'and all alone stands hugely politic'. (SB notes that the exclamation presents, among other things, 'a logically incidental example of a suitable prefatory exclamation introducing an *impediment* volunteered by a parishioner responding to the injunction in the marriage service').

Of course it is partly due to the slow process of being drawn into the sonnets, with their continuous change and varying cycles of elation and depression, that the view is gradually inculcated into one's soul that this is a history of love which anyone might have known, a mortal and immortal love such as any two lovers in the tide of times might have experienced, or might even be experiencing now. We tend to forget that it is also an unconventional love, even more unconventional in the Elizabethan world than it is today. But it is precisely this unconventionality that gives to the sonnets their subversive tone, and it is that tone which forces us, not so much to be on the defensive, but to question more profoundly what we mean by the word love. What is that strange attraction which draws two minds so irresistibly together? Must we classify or restrict it? Does it depend on time, or place, on beliefs, on the sex of the lovers, on the Church, or politics, life, death, change, removal, doom, eternity, the day of judgement? Or on none of these? Is human love an allegory of divine

love? Or should one prefer instead the all too human conclusion of W. H. Auden:

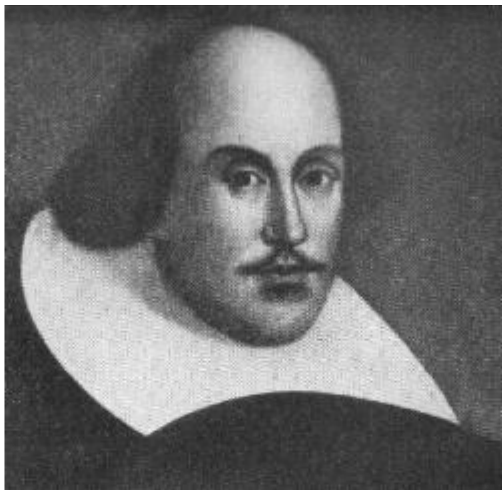
I thought that love would last forever. I was wrong.

HV reads this sonnet as a direct refutal of the young man's cynically declared view of love in which change and betrayal are expected and necessary and truth is of no importance. HV 488-93.

SB gives a very detailed analysis of the many possible reactions to the nuances and suggestiveness of the language and tries to show how our minds respond to the ideal of love depicted, even though we gradually become aware of the hidden counter suggestions. SB. 387-92

All but one of the extant copies of Q give the number of this sonnet, incorrectly, as 119. See SB. p.384.

The 1609 Quarto Version



LEt me not to the marriage of true mindes
Admit impediments,loue is not loue
Which alters when it alteration findes,
Or bends with the remouer to remoue.
O no,it is an euer fixed marke
That lookes on tempeſts and is neuer ſhaken;
It is the ſtar to euery wandring barke,
Whoſe worths vnknowne,although his higth
be taken.
Lou's not Times foole,though roſie lips and cheeks
Within his bending ſickles compaſſe come,

Loue alters not with his breefe houres and weekes,
But beares it out euen to the edge of doome:
   If this be error and vpon me proued,
   I neuer writ,nor no man euer loued.

Commentary

1. Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Let me not = Whatever else I agree to, I will not concede that etc.; I will not be forced to admit that.

The negative wish, if that is how it might be best described, almost reads like the poet's injunction against himself to prevent him from admitting something which he was on the point of conceding. Perhaps he was being told frequently by others, and the beloved himself, that love could not last for ever, that there were impediments, that there was change and alteration, loss and physical decay, all of which militate against true love. And finally, as an act of defiance, he insists that it is not as others see it, that love can surmount all these obstacles, that although nothing can last forever, yet true love can last and hold out until the final reckoning.

the marriage of true minds - this suggests a union that is non-physical, Platonic and idealistic. See the introduction above.

true = constant, faithful, unchanging, truthful. Compare Polonius in Hamlet:

--to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man. Ham.I.3.78-80.

2. Admit impediments. Love is not love

Admit = accept, agree that there are; allow to enter or to intrude. By all commentators this is taken to be a clear reference to the marriage ceremony, when the officiating clergyman proclaims: 'I require and charge you, as you will answer at the dreadful day of judgement, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed, that if either of you do know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, that ye confess it.' However the only word which links this

extract from the Marriage Service in The Book of Common Prayer to the sonnet is *impediment*, which has become the plural *impediments* here. But the use of *marriage* in line 1 and *impediments* immediately following makes the connection almost inevitable. In Much Ado the word is used three times in connection with preventing a marriage:

It is so; the Count Claudio shall marry the daughter of Leonato.
BOR. Yea, my lord; but I can cross it.
DON J. Any bar, any cross, any impediment will be medicinable to me
MA.II.2.1-4.

Means your lordship to be married to-morrow?
DON P. You know he does.
DON J. I know not that, when he knows what I know.
CL. If there be any impediment, I pray you discover it. MA.III.2.78-83.

FRIAR *If either of you know any inward impediment why you*
should not be conjoined, I charge you, on your souls, to utter it.
MA.IV.1.11-13.

Love is not love = that sort of love is not true love which etc.

3. Which alters when it alteration finds,

Which changes (ceases, becomes unfaithful, becomes less) when it finds a change in the beloved, or a change in circumstances.

4. Or bends with the remover to remove:

bends = yields, changes direction, is untrue and inconstant towards a loved one.
the remover = one who moves, one who shifts his ground, one who changes himself.
to remove = to make oneself different in accordance with the changes in the other person. In this context, the word *remove* has a rather indefinite meaning, suggestive of moving something or someone out of the way, possibly even suggestive of subterfuge. Compare however:
Then happy I, that love and am beloved
Where I may not remove nor be removed. 25
Not being moved or removed implies eternal constancy and fidelity.

5. O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,

an ever-fixed mark = a sea mark, a prominent navigational feature, a beacon, for guidance of shipping. In the days before lighthouses, mariners used well known and prominent features on the land as a guide to fix their position at sea. The spires of coastal churches, towers, outcrops of rock of a particular shape or colour were obvious sea marks. Beacons were no doubt also lit at the entrances to major ports, but there was no widespread network of lighthouses as in modern times. Mostly sailors were highly dependent on local knowledge. The point of the metaphor here is that the ever-fixed mark is permanent and unshakeable, always there as a guide to the storm tossed mariner.

fixed - pronounced fixèd.

6. That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

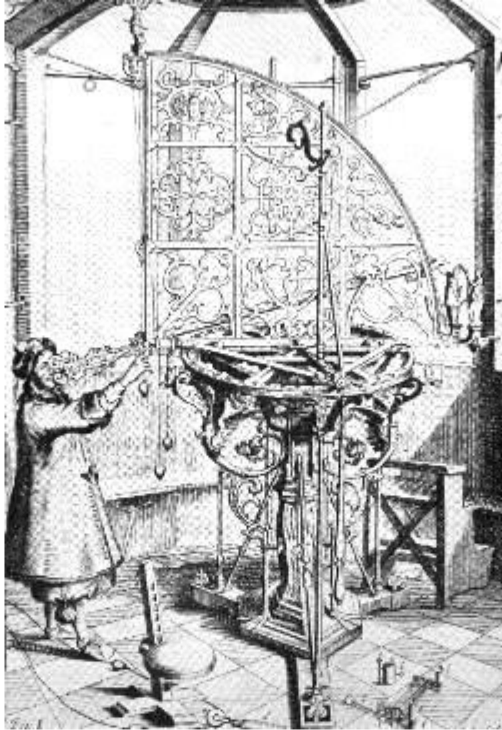
That looks on tempests - because of their height, the sea-marks would appear to be looking down on the world below, and almost riding above the tempests. Because of their solidity storms had no effect on them.

7. It is the star to every wandering bark,

It - i.e. love, as in line 5. Love is both the ever fixed mark and the Pole star to guide the lover through the stormy waters of life.
the star - the most obvious reference is to the Pole or North star. In the Northern hemisphere it always appears to be unmoving in the Northern sky, while all the other stars circle around it. Julius Caesar boasts of being immovable, like the northern star:
But I am constant as the northern star,
Of whose true-fix'd and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament. JC.III.1.60-2.

wandering bark = ship or boat that is wandering and possibly lost. It can identify its position by reference to the Pole star.

8. Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.



Whose worth's unknown = the true nature and value of which is unknown. It was not known at the time what the stars were made of, or how they shone, although various theories existed. Modern astronomy cannot be said to begin before the eighteenth century, even though Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo had more or less overturned, by Elizabethan times, the Ptolemaic system of an earth-centred universe.

although his height be taken = although its angle of elevation above the horizon could be measured. The height of the Pole star above the horizon at its zenith was a guide to the ship's latitude. The measurement would probably have been done with a quadrant. The sextant was introduced slightly later. (See OED *quadrant* 5, *sextant* 3.) The illustration of a quadrant opposite is of one which would be used on land. For sea travelling no doubt much more compact versions were available.

his height = the height (angle) of the star. Q gives *higth*, which is probably intended to be *highth*, a variant form of *height*.

To take the height of (something) = to measure its position relative to the horizon. The phrase could also be used in a figurative sense meaning 'to assess the importance, quality, type etc. of something'. As in this example from Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist:*

The doctor, I asssure you, shall inform you,
To the least shadow of a hair, and show you
An instrument he has of his own making,
Wherewith no sooner shall you make report
Of any quarrel, but he will take the height on't
Most instantly, and tell in what degree
Of safety it lies in, or mortality.
And how it may be borne, whether in a right line,
Or a half circle; or else may be cast
Into an angle blunt, if not acute. Alc.III.2.352-61.

In this, the alchemist and his assistant are attempting to trick a young jacakanapes to give them money, and they try to impress him with scientific mumbo-jumbo, pretending that they can, using an instrument, tell when it is safe to quarrel with someone. *The Alchemist* was written circa1609-10.

9. Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Time's fool - In Shakespeare's day readers would probably understand this in terms of the fool employed in large establishments by the nobility, a favoured character whose wit enlivened many a dull day. But their position was probably precarious, and they were liable to physical punishment, or dismissal. See King Lear:

Prithee, nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can teach
thy fool to lie: I would fain learn to lie.
Lear. *An you lie, sirrah, we'll have you whipped.*
Fool. *I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are:*
they'll have me whipped for speaking true, thou'lt
have me whipped for lying; and sometimes I am
whipped for holding my peace. I had rather be any
kind o' thing than a fool: KL.I.4.177-183.

There is also the more general meaning of being the dupe or plaything of someone, being led by the nose. The following is also from King Lear:

None of these rogues and cowards
But Ajax is their fool. KL.II.2.118-9.

where Kent is implying that Cornwall is being easily duped by lying servants.

rosy lips and cheeks - symbolic of all mortal beauty, but especially between lovers. They are cut down by Time's sickle.

10. Within his bending sickle's compass come;

bending sickle - the sickle had a curved blade, and several meanings of 'bending' are appropriate, as 1.) curved; 2.) causing the grass that it cuts to bend and bow; 3.) cutting a curved swathe in the grass.

compass = scope, the arc of the circle created by the sweep of the sickle. But with a reference back to the nautical metaphors of the previous lines. Time, with his scythe, or sickle, sweeps down the mortal lovers, the rosy lips and cheeks, as if they were blades of grass.

11. Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

his = Time's. All life is fleeting, and human life is measured by the brief hours and weeks of experience. In comparison with the eternity of love, any unit of time is short. But see SB pp.390-1.

12. But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

bears it out = endures, continues faithful.
the edge of doom = the last day, the day of judgement, the day of death. *doom* in Shakespeare can mean a person's death, as it still does in the phrase, *to meet one's doom*. Or it can be applied to the day of the Last Judgement, or the judgement itself. Macbeth exclaims in horror against the long sequence of Banquo's descendants who are to reign in his place hereafter:

What, will the line stretch out till the crack of doom! Mac.IV.1.117.

13. If this be error and upon me proved,

If this be error = if my claim that love lasts for ever is erroneous. *error* also suggests wandering (from the truth), as above in line 7. *every wandering bark*. From the Latin verb *errare* - to wander.

upon me proved - a legalistic term, meaning, approximately, 'proved against me'. The combination of this term with that of *error* possibly

implies religious heresy and action taken against it, as for example in the frequent practice used by the Inquisition to compel victims under torture to confess to the error of their ways. See JK p.334. Compare also the following from Volpone by Ben Jonson, circa 1605:
Volt. *Would you have him tortured?*
Bon. *I would have him proved.*
Volt. *Best try him with goads or burning irons;*
Put him to the strappado; Volp.IV.2.

14. I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

I never writ = I have never written anything.
nor no man ever loved = and no man has ever loved (even though he believed himself to be in love).

The fact that there is no logical connection between love's eternal status and whether or not the poet has written anything, or men think themselves to be in love, is largely irrelevant, because the poem has by now made its seemingly irrefutable claim. The weakness of the concluding couplet does contribute to a slight sense of disappointment, because the preceding lines are so vibrant with life and love. Perhaps this is intentional, in order to underscore the transitory nature of all that we experience, and to show that, despite our grandiose claims to immortality,

we all must depart beneath the eternal vault, and love itself paradoxically, though eternal, is part of mortality:

For the sword wears out the sheath
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.

Sonnet 73: That time of year thou mayst in me behold

The narrator of Sonnet 73 is approaching death and thinking about how different it is from being young. It's like the branch of a tree where birds once sang but the birds have gone and the leaves have fallen, leaving only a few dry yellow leaves. It's like the twilight of a beautiful day, where there is only the black night ahead. It's like the glowing ashes of a fire that once roared. The things that one gave him life have destroyed his life. From that experience he has learnt that one has to love life as strongly as one can because it will end all too soon.

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.
In me thou see'st 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 see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,

Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

The sonnet is the third in the group of four which reflect on the onset of age. It seems that it is influenced partly by lines from Ovid's Metamorphoses, in the translation by Arthur Golding. However the verbal parallels are somewhat sparse. Shakespeare's presentation is much more individualistic and cannot easily be attributed to any one mould or influence. It is worth noting that, if the sonnet were written in 1600, Shakespeare would only have been 36, and it is quite probable that it was written before that date. An age that we would not consider to be the threshold of old age. Of course the group of four sonnets, of which this is the third, begins with a putative skirmish with death and finality, so that it is in a sense merely thematic within that group to discuss the autumn of one's years, which will shortly lead to parting and separation. We can therefore allow that it uses some poetic licence in painting a gloomy portrayal of the withered tree.

Nevertheless it is slightly surprising that the statements are so definite and uncompromising. This is how he is now, it is not some prognostication of decay, or a brief glimpse forwards to some imaginary time. The picture is more like that of age on his death-bed, of the autumn tree, of the onset of night, of the actuality of dying. The thought seems closer to the anonymous 16th. century poem

As ye came from the holy land
Of Walsinghame
Met you not with my true love
By the way as you came?

which becomes a lament for love's faithlessness as age comes on.

She hath left me here alone,
All alone, as unknown,
Who sometime did me lead with herself,
And me loved as her own.

What's the cause that she leaves you alone
And a new way doth take,
That sometime did love you as her own,
And her joy did you make?

I have loved her all my youth,
But now old, as you see:
Love likes not the falling fruit,
Nor the withered tree.

Some lines from T*he Passionate Pilgrim* of 1599, which are often attributed to Shakespeare, are also relevant. (See below). Perhaps Shakespeare was offering this sonnet as a charm to ward off rejection. Perhaps the rejection was already evident and this is just a historical analysis of what he already knows to be the truth, a *deja vu* of love's forgetfulness. Or perhaps he genuinely felt that age had stolen a march on him.

From *The Passionate Pilgrim.*

Crabbed age and youth
Cannot live together:
Youth is full of pleasaunce,
Age is full of care;
Youth like summer morn,
Age like winter weather;
Youth like summer brave,
Age like winter bare.

The 1609 Quarto Version

THat time of yeeare thou maiſt in me behold,
When yellow leaues,or none,or fewe doe hange
Vpon thoſe boughes which ſhake againſt the could,
Bare rn'wd quiers,where late the ſweet birds ſang.
In me thou ſeeſt the twi-light of ſuch day,
As after Sun-ſet fadeth in the Weſt,
Which by and by blacke night doth take away,
Deaths ſecond ſelfe that ſeals vp all in reſt.
In me thou ſeeſt the glowing of ſuch fire,
That on the aſhes of his youth doth lye,
As the death bed,whereon it muſt expire,
Conſum'd with that which it was nurriſht by.
  This thou perceu'ſt,which makes thy loue more ſtrong,
  To loue that well,which thou muſt leaue ere long.

Commentary

1. That time of year thou mayst in me behold

You may observe in me that time of life which is like the time of year when etc. The word *behold*, meaning 'to see or to observe', is mostly literary and not often used nowadays.

2. When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang

The line, by its pauses, almost re-creates the blowing away of the last resistant fading leaves by the autumn wind. Only a few stalwart ones finally remain. Cf. Coleridge
The one red leaf, the last of its clan,
That dances as often as dance it can. Christabel. 49-50
There is a suggestion also of the faded, yellowing papers with the poet's lines written on them, as in Sonnet 17:
So should my papers, yellow'd with their age.
The poet is like a tree with his decaying, worn out verses being dispersed in the wind.

3. Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

shake against the cold = tremble in anticipation of cold days to come; shiver in the actual cold; shake in the cold blast of the gale. *against* is

used in the sense of 'in anticipation of, in preparation for' in Sonnets 49 and 63.

4. Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

4. The emendation of Q's *rn'wd quiers* to *ruined choirs* is generally accepted. 'Choir' was the spelling adopted from the close of the 17th century. In Shakespeare's day it was *quyre, quire,* or *quiere.* The choir is the part of the church at the top, eastern end, the chancel, where the choristers stood and sang. Shakespeare uses the word seven times, only twice with this meaning.
......The rich stream
Of lords and ladies, having brought the queen
To a prepared place in the choir, fell off
A distance from her; H8.IV.1.62-5. and
Our valour is to chase what flies; our cage
We make a quire, as doth the prison'd bird,
And sing our bondage freely. Cym.III.3.42-4
Elsewhere the meaning is that of a group of singers, presumably choristers, as in this from 2H6:
myself have limed a bush for her,
And placed a quire of such enticing birds,
That she will light to listen to the lays, 2H6.I.3.86-8
In Midsummer Night's Dream it is used to mean a company of friends or gossips:
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she,
And 'tailor' cries, and falls into a cough;
And then the whole quire hold their hips and laugh,
And waxen in their mirth and neeze and swear MND.II.1.51-6.

Since the publication of Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in 1930 (the extract is given at the bottom of this page) commentators tend to agree that the imagery recalls the many ruined abbeys and churches which were left to decay after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. Churches were also vandalised or abandoned at various times in Elizabeth's reign. In the early years of the reign there were few parish priests, and later, after the religious settlement and with the spreading influence of

European reformist ideas, churches could be seen as symbols of popery and reaction and of the old religion. Enclosures of common land, with the consequent abandonment of villages, would also have caused some churches to fall to ruin. However it is not possible to say with certainty that the image of a ruined chancel was primarily what Shakespeare had in mind. He tends not to use the word ruin(s) or ruined other than in a figurative or general sense, as in:
Ruin hath led me thus to ruminate Sonnet 64
or in
..........The king has cured me,
I humbly thank his grace; and from these shoulders,
These ruin'd pillars, out of pity, taken
A load would sink a navy, too much honour. H8.III.2.380-3.
But the above is the only instance where the word specifically refers to a building or a part of a building, and the lines were possibly written by Fletcher. Generally Shakespeare is more interested in wreckages of human personalities -
.............She once being loof'd,
The noble ruin of her magic, Antony,
Claps on his sea-wing, AC.III.10.18-20.
(*loofed* = with the head of the ship turned towards the wind).
Perhaps the most famous line featuring ruin is from Julius Caesar, when Antony speaks over Caesar's corpse:
Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times. JC.III.1.257-8.

I remain unconvinced that the rich stream of suggestions listed by Empson in Seven Types of Ambiguity, (see below), which has led to much debate on this line, is entirely justified. It is a mattter of opinion whether branches of trees look very much like ruined abbeys. Readers must judge the matter for themselves. Other fleeting references in the line may be to quires of paper which contain songs and sonnets. Or to the composer William Byrd, who moved away from London in the 1590's, probably owing to his Catholicism.

5. In me thou see'st the twilight of such day

of such day = of such a day of late autumn or winter as I have been describing. Or *day* could be a synonym for 'light', allowing the meaning

to run on to the next line. 'In me you see such a time of life which is like twilight, when the daylight, after sunset, fades away in the West'.

6. As after sunset fadeth in the west;

See note above.

7. Which by and by black night doth take away,

Which = the twilight.
by and by = fairly rapidly; soon. Cf. Hamlet's response to Polonius - *I will come to my mother by and by.* Ham.III.2.373.
take away = As well as the meaning of 'remove' there is also the implication of doing away with, killing, destroying by underhand means. Thus Macbeth, contemplating the murder of Duncan, fears that Duncan's virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking off. Mac.I.7.19-20.
Night kills off the daylight, as a murderer kills his victim.

8. Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

Sleep is often portrayed as a second self of Death, or Death's brother. Compare:
Care Charmer Sleep, son of the sable Night,
Brother to Death, in silent darkness born:
Samuel Daniel, Sonnets to Delia, liv. (c 1600).
But in this sonnet Night takes the place of sleep as the grand slayer. Three images are possibly condensed here. That of sealing a coffin; sealing a letter, or a will, or a sentence of death, (i.e. folding it up and using sealing wax to seal it: envelopes were a later invention); covering over the eyes (seeling), as one did with tamed birds of prey. Similar imagery is used in Macbeth:
..........*Come seeling Night,*
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day. Mac.III.2.46-7.
But the thought in Mac. is somewhat different, being concerned with Macbeth's determination to ally himself with evil forces in Nature.

9. In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,

such fire = such as is seen at twilight; such as is described in the next line.

10. That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,

his youth = the fire's youth. The possessive 'its' was not yet in use in Elizabethan England, so we should not assume that the word 'his' adds more to the sense of personification than if it had been 'its youth'.

11. As the death-bed, whereon it must expire,

As the death-bed - the ashes of his youth are as a death-bed; *whereon it must expire* = on which it, the fire, or the youth, must at last die.

12. Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.

Consumed with that = consumed, eaten away, at the same time as; eaten away by those things (which also nourish it). Similar to the line from Sonnet I :
Feeds thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel.
Life's progress from beginning to end is summed up in one line.

13. This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,

Possibly a wish, rather than a statement of fact. 'When you perceive this, it will strengthen your love'. *this* presumably refers to the poet's waning life, described in the quatrains.

14. To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.

that = that person, spirit, dream of your imagination, me, the poet. Alternatively - your youth and freshness which is doomed to the same fate.
well - could include a pun on Will, the poet's name.
leave = depart from, abandon; give up. A sidelong glance also at 'to come into leaf'. SB points out that the couplet could have a bawdy interpretation.

Additional notes

Empson's comment on line 4.

The fundamental situation, whether it deserves to be called ambiguous or not, is that a word or a grammatical structure is effective in several ways at once. To take a famous example, there is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling in

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang,

but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter, because the cold and narcissistic charm suggested by choir-boys suits well with Shakespeare's feeling for the object of the Sonnets, and for various sociological and historical reasons (the protestant destruction of monasteries; fear of puritanism), which it would be hard now to trace out in their proportions; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in

not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind. Clearly this is involved in all such richness and heightening of effect, and the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry.

W. Empson*, Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Ch.I.