

“Applying this to that and so to so”: the anti-coal
environmental allegory and the Divine
Feminine in *Venus and Adonis*

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The Elizabethan era in London is not usually associated with coal and coal smoke, yet data show that “coal consumption per head increased by a multiple of about 45 between Tudor and Victorian times, an average annual growth rate of approximately 1.3 percent per annum, which implies almost a doubling every half century” (Wrigley 96), although Paul Warde puts the annual increase at nearer 2% per year (Warde 110). Moreover, Britain stands out among other countries in the world and in Europe for its early adoption of coal (this was made possible by its vast coal reserves):

Coal dominated the energy picture in England as early as the end of the seventeenth century, and in the nineteenth century eclipsed all rival sources entirely. But this was not true in other European countries until a much later date. (Wrigley 98)

Shakespeare’s lifetime of 52 years (1564 – 1606) was then enough time for him to see and experience a doubling of coal consumption.

It was this momentum, this heavy, underlying use of coal as fuel for heat energy, that prompted J.U. Nef, in the *Rise of the British Coal Industry*, to call “the change which overtook English economic life between the early sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries” “an early Industrial Revolution” (Nef 165). Nef adds:

Scholars are aware that Elizabeth's reign marks the beginning of an epoch in the history of British coal mining. Yet they rarely appear to appreciate how rapid was the expansion of the industry between the accession of Elizabeth and the Revolution of 1688. Nor do they seem to realize what an extensive influence coal had upon the industrial, the commercial, the social, and even the political development of England and Scotland before the Industrial Revolution. (Nef 14)

Coal enabled people to avoid having to be economically constrained by using wood for fuel and this economically-motivated switchover to coal from wood was happening quite intensely during Shakespeare's lifetime: "Fears of a general 'timber famine' by the early seventeenth century were alleviated by the very early and rapid expansion of coal use" (Warde 110). Instead, due to coal and its widespread economic effects, a building and population boom occurred in London during the Elizabethan era. In his *Survey of London* (1598; second edition 1603), the English historian John Stow often describes how he saw open fields often being covered with buildings:

Also without the barres, both the sides of the streete bee pestered with Cottages, and Allies, euen vp to White chappel church: and almost halfe a mile beyond it, into the common field: all which ought to lye open & free for all men. But this common field, I say, being sometime the beauty of this City on that part, is so incroched vpon by building of filthy Cottages, and with other purprestures, inclosures and Laystalles (notwithstanding all proclamations and Acts of Parliament made to the contrary) that in some places it scarce remaineth a sufficient high way for the meeting of Carriages and droues of Cattell, much lesse is there any faire, pleasant or wholsome way for people to walke on foot: which is no small blemish to so famous a city, to haue so vnsauery and vnseemly an entry or passage thereunto¹.

The booming population in London, without ready access to forests,

increasingly burned coal instead of wood, with coal consumption "surging" starting in 1570 (Freese 33). Consequently, the polluting effects of coal smoke are well documented in the history of London around this time; for example, in 1603, a man named Hugh Platt proposed in a new book that his recipe for coal briquettes mixed with soil would solve the problem of coal smoke pollution. In this book, *A new, cheape, and delicate Fire of Cole-balles, wherein Seacole is by mixture of other combustible bodies both sweetened and multiplied*, he noted that "coal smoke was damaging the buildings and plants of London, and he does not treat the problem as a particularly new one" (Freese 34). Earlier, in 1578, "it was reported that Elizabeth I was greatly grieved and annoyed with the taste and smoke of sea-coles" (Freese 34).

Although there clearly were negative aspects to coal, such as its thick and unhealthy smoke, it obviously prevailed in the culture of early modern England and its successor cultures. Barry Lord, in *Art & Energy: How Culture Changes*, notes that "energy is a keystone industry on which our entire material culture and economic structure depend" (Lord 5). Echoing the theme of change in Nef above, Lord writes that because of the fundamental position energy has in a society, energy transitions bring "cultural change" (Lord 6). "New energy sources bring new values and meanings with them. These must be accepted to some extent by everyone because of the ubiquity of energy and our dependence on it to sustain our cultures. The values associated with formerly dominant sources of energy begin to be perceived as old-fashioned or conservative" (Lord 6).

In other words, "each energy source requires us to adopt certain values, set priorities or make sacrifices in order to access, deliver and use that source in sufficient volume to meet our needs" (Lord 4). Therefore, if an energy transition occurs, it may be necessary for some cultural values to be "suppressed" while others are "prioritized" (Lord 6). Emphasis on money,

profits, and financial success became some of the values that were prioritized as the new epoch of the coal industry opened as Elizabeth's reign began. Nef confirms this:

The change which overtook English economic life between the early sixteenth and the late seventeenth centuries needs no emphasis. A diarist in the reign of Henry VIII would hardly have thanked God with the same assurance as Pepys for the monthly evidence of his advancing fortune, measured in cold hard cash. (Nef 165)

William Shakespeare was in London in the late 1500s and early 1600s, just as British coal mining and consumption was beginning its new epoch. I make the rather radical claim that Shakespeare, surveying the changes in his society, decided that they were unfortunate and unsustainable. However, given the "difference of atmosphere" (Nef 165) occurring, the old cultural values that belonged to the sun economy were obviously no longer in fashion. As an artist, he realized that if he wished to support the dying (but always latent) sun economy (what we call renewable energy today), he would need to disguise his message and hope that future generations would appreciate it more after they had decoded it. In my strategy, I am making use of French critic Pierre Macherey's approach in which "literature is no longer a matter of pure aesthetic creation, but becomes a form of knowledge, the material bearer of certain truth effects which require deciphering" (qtd. in Thomas 129).

Shakespeare's attitude towards coal's dominance is covertly and most autobiographically expressed in *Hamlet*, where a witty and iconoclastic prince, who often mentions the sun (to the great puzzlement of those in the court), seeks to take revenge on a usurping king (Claudius) who says his own offense "smells to heaven" (mirroring coal smoke ascending to the sky) and calls his bosom "black as death" (the color of coal smoke) and his soul "limed"

(recalling the lime kilns, an early industry where coal was often burned). The dead king (the sun economy) is associated with Hyperion, a sun god, while hapless Gertrude, analogous to British society which, without any forethought, made the switch from one energy source to another, must marry the new guy because the old one is dead².

This paper will cover an earlier work which Shakespeare wrote, *Venus and Adonis* (1592–3). I have found that this long poem is also part of Shakespeare's literary project to lament the ascendance of fossil fuels in public but covertly, through allegory and strategic use of imagery. Written well before Shakespeare became emotionally affected by Giordano Bruno's tragic execution in 1600, *Venus and Adonis* instead reflects a more light-hearted poetic sensibility, probably inspired by the decadence of London as it became a wealthy, prosperous, crowded place but 'lost its sun' as the energy transition to coal gained momentum.

Each successor culture of this early modern English culture has also lost its sun in turn and adopted, one by one, coal and capitalism. Losing its sun means that now each country in the world has its own date in its history when fossil fuels became its main source of fuel, but this happened first in England. The loss of the sun as a main energy source and also as a main generator of culture provides the basic plot movement for *Venus and Adonis*: that is, the death of Adonis represents the capitulation of the sun economy. Thus *Venus and Adonis* is an allegory.

There was as "older tradition stretching back into the Middle Ages.... to moralize and allegorize Ovidian myth" (Evans 1704) writes Hallet Smith in *The Riverside Shakespeare*. The concept of using Ovid as a tool for allegory was, therefore, not novel, and Shakespeare must have been familiar with it. However, it is likely that his idea to aim his critique at the practice of burning fossil fuels was original and unusual in his time.

Venus and Adonis is a narrative poem based on “Venus and Adonis” from Book X of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. *Venus and Adonis* appeared in print before any of Shakespeare’s plays were published, but not before some of his plays had been performed on stage. It was written when the London theatres were closed for a time due to the plague, and, of all of Shakespeare’s works, it was the most popular during his lifetime. The poem starts with a brief dedication to Shakespeare’s patron, Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton. It tells the story of Venus (the Roman Goddess of Love), who attempts to seduce Adonis, who would rather go hunting.

The very first thing to notice, since it appears on the title page (above all the other elements of the play) is the Latin motto: *Vilia miretur vulgus; mihi flavus Apollo/Pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua*. These lines (from Ovid’s *Amores*, I.xv.35–6) translate as “*Let base-conceited wits admire vile things,/ Fair Phoebus lead me to the Muses’ springs*”³. Shakespeare, besides disliking coal, was obviously also a great admirer of the sun, so it is natural that he would choose lines that praise Phoebus, the Greek god of the sun, and highlight Phoebus’ power to inspire artists.

The first stanza of the poem sets up an equation (Adonis=sun) which also presents the basic framework for the poem, since the sun and Adonis are both described in similar terms with colorful aspects of the face referred to (“purple-colored face”/“rose-cheek’d”). In addition, the sun is seen leaving the “weeping morn” (the goddess of the dawn, weeping poetically since she is associated with dew and including the playful insinuation that the sun-god has left her bed making her sad), while Adonis also displays a similar turning away from a lover (“love he laughed to scorn”):

Even as the sun, with purple-colored face
Had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn,

Rose-cheek'd Adonis hied him to the chase;
Hunting he lov'd, but love he laugh'd to scorn.
Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
And like a bold-fac'd suitor gins to woo him. (1 – 6)

More fundamentally, the phrase "ta'en his last leave", in such an early and prime position, announces in a coded yet complete way the theme of this poem: the exit or capitulation of the sun economy as coal enters the scene and begins to dominate and replace the wood (sun-driven) economy. Using Macherey's terminology, this phrase, when understood, very intensely "betrays the shadowy presence...of conflicting historical powers" (qtd. in Thomas, 129).

The fourth word of the first line is "sun". Shakespeare is always very sensitive to the importance of using first lines of his plays or poems to announce a theme, discreetly and even playfully. This sun is not just "the sun" (the hot ball in the sky), but also we see that it is a living god who "takes leave" of a lover. By 1592, England was a Christian country, yet Shakespeare was not afraid to camouflage his affinities for pagan culture behind this conventional classical rhetoric. The sun, for Shakespeare, was not just an economic entity but also a cultural one and he also had religious or spiritual feelings towards it.

Adonis is associated and equated with the sun again and again, not just in the first stanza. Later, for example, Venus calls Adonis an "earthly sun":

The sun that shines from heaven shines but warm,
And lo I lie between that sun and thee;
The heat I have from thence doth little harm,
Thine eye darts forth the fire that burneth me,
And were I not immortal, life were done,
Between this heavenly and earthly sun. (193 – 197)

The interesting next question is "who is Venus in this allegory?" This is one

of the very most fascinating aspects of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and in order to understand the answer, one has to compare Shakespeare's poem with its source, "Venus and Adonis" in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

In Ovid's version of "Venus and Adonis", Venus tells Adonis about an event that has left a small black cloud over her life. The story is the famous "Atalanta" story, where Venus gave Hippomenes three golden apples to throw down near Atalanta as he was racing her (if he won he could marry her; if he lost, he would be executed). The golden apple ruse worked perfectly and Hippomenes won the race and married Atalanta. However, Hippomenes forgot to properly thank Venus. She says, "And I, Adonis, did I not deserve/ Especial thanks and incense in my honor?/ But he forgot; he gave no thanks and burnt no incense; then to sudden wrath I turned" (Ovid 246). Vengefully, Venus then causes Hippomenes to be overcome by sexual desire as he and Atalanta walk in a forest near a temple belonging to the Goddess Cybele (Mother of the Gods) (Ovid 247). Hippomenes, overcome with desire, leads Atalanta into Cybele's temple and he and Atalanta "defiled the sanctuary" (Ovid 247) with an act of intercourse. To punish the couple for this desecration, Cybele turns them into lions and ever since then, Ovid's Venus explains to Adonis, "for my sake beware of lions and of every savage beast" (Ovid 247).

In Ovid's version, therefore, there is a vague connection between Venus and the boar who kills Adonis. The implication is that wild, savage beasts are generally set against Venus and would like to harm anyone who is beloved by her. Importantly, she understands this. In Ovid's version, the wheel of justice comes full circle when the boar (presumably one of the savage beasts involved in meting out vengeance to Venus for making Hippomenes feel overcome by sexual desire in the wrong time and place) kills Adonis and leaves Venus feeling bereft.

However, in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, the whole "Atalanta" episode,

with Hippomenes, Atalanta, Cybele, the golden apples, the race, the moment of carnal desire and the transformation of the lustful couple into lions, is completely excised, along with this sense of justice meted out.

Why did Shakespeare cut away the "Atalanta" story and thus the satisfying connection between the boar and Venus?

In my opinion, in the underlying allegory, Venus is English society under the influence of coal — and this is a society that does not really understand (or maybe even care) how its own backstory or behavior could have any effect on "Adonis" or the sun. This society simply does not 'get' how its behavior (mining coal and burning it) will end with the death of something it may care about.

Instead of the "Atalanta" story, Shakespeare substitutes and emphasizes unpleasant, one-sided and lustful sexual scenes between Venus and Adonis that are not found in Ovid. The desecrating sexual act that takes place between Hippomenes and Atalanta in Ovid is reshaped and occurs between Venus and Adonis instead. It is this close and also desecrating sexual contact that is a symbol of Venus' lack of respect for Adonis, because he is unwilling to yield to her lust. (In Ovid he appears not so unwilling.) It is rape which she commits.

Therefore, in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, two creatures end up having very intimate physical contact with Adonis: Venus and the boar (whose tusk impales Adonis' "groin" (1116) and kills him). Through imagery, these two characters, Venus and the boar, are strongly associated and their intimate acts are conflated and equated through imagery they share, so that Venus comes to seem similar to the boar in her vicious and intimate disregard for Adonis' well-being. Though she always expresses affection for him, her affection is hypocritical. She commits rape and is a destructive force equal to the boar.

Shakespeare's idea is that English society brutally put an end to the sun economy without quite understanding what it was doing. Though people may

have mouthed words expressing love for nature and their land, as Venus assures Adonis that she loves him, they did not hesitate to build on land and expand economically, using more and more coal in the process and making the sun economy progressively more useless and culturally and economically remote from themselves.

The imagery in the poem blurring the difference between Venus' aggressive *sexual* advances and the boar's *fatal* attack supports my interpretation. For example, after Adonis is killed, Venus comments on his slaying: "But this foul, grim, and urchin-snouted boar..... thought to kiss him (Adonis) and hath killed him so" (1105&1110). The extended metaphor continues:

'Tis true, 'tis true, thus was Adonis slain:
 He ran upon the boar with his sharp spear,
 Who did not whet his teeth at him again,
 But by a kiss thought to persuade him there;
 And nouseling in his flank, the loving swine
 Sheath'd unaware the tusk in his soft groin.

Had I been tooth'd like him, I must confess,
 With kissing him I should have killed him first,
 But he is dead, and never did he bless
 My youth with his, the more I am accurs'd."
 With this she falleth in the place she stood,
 And stains her face with his congealed blood. (1111 – 1122)

Venus's face stained with blood recalls the face of the boar, which earlier we read, has a "frothy mouth bepainted all with red" (901).

In the same vein, the sexual contact that occurs when she forces herself on Adonis is described in terms of a violent killing, making her once again equivalent to the boar; she is even said to "forage":

And having felt the sweetness of the spoil,
With blindfold fury she begins to forage;
Her face doth reek and smoke, her blood doth boil,
And careless lust stirs up a desperate courage... (553 – 556)

The fact that her face *reeks and smokes* associates her with coal, since the smell of coal smoke was very unpleasant.

Just before this scene of reeking and smoking, which is the climax of the poem, Venus' sexual advances are described in commercial terms ("paying", "price" "rich treasure") and blended with terms that relate to animals hunting each other, revealing that Shakespeare understood how social values were changing to emphasize 'cold hard cash', or the brutal and predatory commerce of capitalism:

Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey,
And glutton-like, she feeds, yet never filleth;
Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,
Paying what ransom the insulter willeth;
Whose vultur thought doth pitch the price so high
That she will draw his lips' rich treasure dry. (547 – 552)

When the sexual conquest of Adonis is about to be completed (in the stanza after the images where Venus "reeks" and "smokes"), Adonis is compared to "a wild bird tam'd with too much handling" (560) or "a fleet-foot roe that's tir'd with chasing" (561): green nature has to yield to the changes of the rapacious coal-powered economy, which has no end in sight ("feeds, yet never filleth"). The extended metaphors show that Shakespeare knew precisely how the system functioned: brutal commerce comes first (financing of coal extraction and general commercial processes setting things into motion), followed by the reeking and smoking as coal is burned in industrial processes, and ending with

nature yielding as insatiable industry expanded further (aka: economic growth).

Very early on in the poem, Venus is compared to coal and associated with it:

Over one arm the lusty courser's rein,
 Under her other was the tender boy,
 Who blush'd, and pouted in dull disdain,
 With leaden appetite, unapt to toy;
She red and hot as coals of glowing fire,
 He red for shame, but frosty in desire. (31 – 36) (my emphasis)

The second time (out of four in total) that the word “coal” is used, it is Adonis who is compared to it:

He sees her coming, and begins to glow,
 Even as a dying coal revives with wind,
 And with his bonnet hides his angry brow;
 Looks on the dull earth with disturbed mind,
 Taking no notice that she is so nigh,
 For all askance he holds her in his eye.

So, the question must be asked, how could Adonis, who is technically the sun, be compared to a coal? It is important to remember that Venus is not “coal” per se, but society changing over to coal. Thus, it is only with the unwanted appearance of Venus that Adonis starts to glow, so she causes this change in him. The sun is being replaced by coal and it is an unpleasant process. Whereas fuel used to be provided by the sun, now that is no longer the case, and to Shakespeare, it is a sad, lamentable and regrettable development, so Adonis has an “angry brow” and a “disturbed mind”. Yet, he must hide his angry brow. As the coal economy replaced the sun economy, people had to accept the changes, such as burning coal inside their houses for

warmth though coal smoke was unpleasant⁴, and, by and large, they had to hide or dismiss any anger they were feeling.

Of course, Shakespeare also had to hide his real opinions or his own angry brow, and disguise his social critique with fascinating literary ruses.

The third time that the word "coal" is seen, it is spoken by Venus when she is lecturing Adonis. She wants him to behave like his lusty horse, who had shortly before suddenly run off with a mare he had happened to spot:

Thus she replies: 'Thy palfrey, as he should,
Welcomes the warm approach of sweet desire:
Affection is a coal that must be cool'd;
Else, suffer'd, it will set the heart on fire:
The sea hath bounds, but deep desire hath none;
Therefore no marvel though thy horse be gone. (385 – 390)

Venus' lecture implies that in her view, people are similar to animals and can just follow instinct to become sexually intimate with anyone conveniently nearby. The whole episode with the horse is fascinating, long and involved, and though Venus draws one lesson from it, the imagery of coal and industry that it cloaks can be seen to point to a slightly different interpretation. In fact, the phrase "dumb play" (359) appears in close proximity to the horse episode, implying that the horse episode is a dumb show, functioning very similarly to way the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet* presents oblique commentary (of an ambiguous nature) on the main action. So let us examine this significant episode of the horse in a little more detail:

.... Away (Adonis) springs and hasteth to his horse

But lo from forth a cosp that neighbors by,

A breeding jennet, lusty, young, and proud,
 Adonis' trampling courser doth espy;
 And forth she rushes, snorts, and neighs aloud.
 The strong-necked steed, being tied unto a tree,
 Breaketh his rein, and to her straight goes he.

Imperiously he leaps, he neighs, he bounds,
 And now his woven girths he breaks asunder;
 The bearing earth with his hard hoof he wounds,
 Whose hollow womb resounds like heaven's thunder;
 The iron bit he crushed 'tween his teeth,
 Controlling what he was controlled with.

His ears up-prick'd, his braided hanging mane
 Upon his compass'd crest now stand on end,
 His nostrils drink the air, and forth again
 As from a furnace, vapors doth he send;
 His eye, which scornfully glisters like fire,
 Shows his hot courage and his high desire. (258 – 276)

Through hidden, veiled and Hermetic imagery the male horse is strongly associated with coal, coal mining, and coal burning. Coal mining and a mine are portrayed secretly through the action of the hoofs: “the bearing earth with his hard hoof he wounds/ Whose hollow womb resounds...” The hollow womb represents a coal mine. The metal tools used in coal mining and production are symbolized by the metal bit he crushes, “controlling what he was controlled with”. Man both controls coal (by mining it) but is also very much controlled, socially and economically, by this material. The lines “As from a furnace, vapors doth he send....his eye....glisters like fire” reflect the coal burning process in a furnace with smoke and fire.

The overt concept is animal passion and sex but the underlying and hidden

idea is actually portraying the producing and consuming of coal. The horse is single-minded in his pursuit of the female horse: "What reckoneth he his rider's angry stir/ His flattering 'Holla' or his 'stand, I say'" (283 – 4). Here is a parallel to the idea that people, who were involved in their own passionate feelings, could somehow be prevented from using coal through someone saying "please stop".

The male horse "neighs unto" the female horse: at first, "she answers him, as if she knew his mind/ Being proud, as females are, to see him woo her/ She puts on outward strangeness, seems unkind" (307 – 310). In response, the male "stamps and bites the flies in his fume/ His love, perceiving how he was enrag'd/ Grew kinder and his fury was assuag'd" (316 – 8). Shortly thereafter the two equines flee into the forest together. Several things are interesting here: first, the word "fume" is used to characterize the male horse's breath, but this word can also be a veiled reference to the smell of coal smoke. Second, the phrase "as females are", along with her initial standoffishness and his response, followed by her capitulation, all imply that their behavior belongs to a pattern of general mating rituals. Beyond just the world of horses, Shakespeare wants to conjure up an image of mammals, of course including humans, engaging in successful mating and procreation.

When this mating ritual is paired with the veiled references to coal, it's possible to conclude that Shakespeare meant to portray the development of an 'ecological niche', which is the match of a species to a specific environmental condition. The concept of an ecological niche describes how an animal responds to conditions, such as energy and resource abundance or scarcity, by reproducing or dying off. In other words, during Shakespeare's lifetime, the new niche of a fossil-fuel based economy created conditions of resource and energy abundance through commerce and this promoted human population growth, which in turn necessitated further coal production, expanding this

niche further, and so on.

Venus' reading or interpretation of the equine episode is important for several reasons. First, as I said, she concretely uses the word coal: "Thy palfrey, as he should/ Welcomes the warm approach of sweet desire/ Affection is a coal that must be cool'd..." (385 – 7) and therefore hints at its central, though cloaked, position in this episode. Second, the fact that she engages in interpretations at all points to the vital significance of deciphering, decoding and interpreting these types of textual 'minima' or microcosms within their larger works in Shakespeare: the plays-within-a play, the small set pieces, and so on. They often contain significant thematic clues corresponding to the broader message. Shakespeare, a true Mannerist, seems to have delighted in setting them out and setting them apart as stylish, allegorical and detailed aesthetic commentary within a larger work.

Later on in the poem, Venus points to another mini-episode, involving "Wat the hare", to illustrate another point for Adonis' benefit. Venus uses this episode ("By this, poor Wat, far-off upon a hill/ Stands on his hinder legs with list'ning ear" (697 – 8)) to convince Adonis that he should also be cautious when hunting:

"Lie quietly, and hear a little more,
Nay, do not struggle, for thou shalt not rise.
To make thee hate the hunting of the boar,
Unlike myself thou hear'st me moralize,
Applying this to that, and so to so,
For love can comment upon every woe. (709 – 14)

The idea conveyed by her phrase "applying this to that, and so to so", and the term "moralize", both give us a clue that conceits and allegorical structures, and associated social or even scientific commentary are at play here in this

poem, and not just in the episode of Wat the hare. The equine episode and in the whole poem in general also need to be seen as conceits and the reader must "apply this to that, and so to so" correctly in order to decipher this mannerist, metaphysical and quite scholarly work of literature. The episode of the horse is a set piece, placed before the reader for contemplation and elaboration (similar, in a way, to Yorick's skull in Hamlet's hands). Thus, for example, the highly stylized quality of the horse is emphasized: "Look when a painter would surpass the life/ in limning out a well-proportioned steed/ His art with nature's workmanship at strife...so did this horse excel a common one..." (289 – 293). The purpose of the horse is to delineate an excellent ecological point: that people are not so different from animals as far as sexual behavior is concerned.

Venus completes her moralizing on the stallion and the mare with these three stanzas:

"How like a jade he stood, tied to the tree,
Servilely mastered with a leathern rein!
But when he saw his love, his youth's fair fee,
He held such petty bondage in disdain,
 Throwing the base thong from his bending crest,
 Enfranchising his mouth, his back, his breast.

"Who sees his true-love in her naked bed,
Teaching the sheets a whiter hue than white,
But when his glutton eye so full hath fed,
His other agents aim at like delight?
 Who is so faint that dares not be so bold
 To touch the fire, the weather being cold?

"Let me excuse they courser, gentle boy,
And learn of him, I heartily beseech thee,

To take advantage on presented joy;
 Though I were dumb, yet his proceedings teach thee,
 O, learn to love, the lesson is but plain,
 And once made perfect, never lost again.” (391 – 408)

By having Venus' lines shift from the topic of Adonis' horse to people (who usually engage in sexual activity naked in bed⁵), the poet confirms that this episode about a mating ritual should be generally understood to include species besides horses. Venus' point is that the sense of sight leads the way and then the other “agents” or senses and organs of the body “aim at like delight” and wish to be equally satisfied sexually. She uses a metaphor for this process: “who is so faint that dares not be so bold/ To touch the fire, the weather being cold”. This metaphor is deeper and more poignant than she realizes: British cold weather and the necessity of fires to keep warm made people dependent on coal.

Furthermore, Venus insists that even if she could not speak (“though were I dumb”) the episode of the horses speaks for itself and can help teach Adonis to “learn to love”. It is certain that this word “love” describes more deeply (within the conceit of the poem) a philosophical relationship with the earth, nature and the cosmos. The surface meaning of love is just romantic love, but the hidden meaning refers to Giordano Bruno's concept of the Heroic Lover, (described in his book *L'eroici furori*), who searches for the Divine Truth and finds it when, like Actaeon, he spots Diana, the goddess, in a forest. In Bruno's philosophy, the realization of the material sacred, the beauty of the goddess and not just the god, the impossibility of separating the human self materially and spiritually from the whole cosmos and the planet, is characterized as “love”. This love is an intellectual and spiritual engagement with the cosmos and nature in a sensitive, thoughtful, harmonious, balanced and respectful way.

This love is conveyed in shorthand by the brief references to "Dian" and "Cynthia" in the text: "so do thy lips make Dian cloudy and forlorn" (724–5); "Cynthia for shame obscures her silver shine" (728), says Venus, complaining about the lack of moonshine, and this Hermetically conveys the problems with coal smoke obscuring the sky⁶. Under cover of the allegory, Shakespeare wishes to convey the superiority of a love that keeps nature beautiful, functioning and healthy. Needless to say, this spiritual and philosophical love is not a type of love that Venus understands yet: her pestering and harassment of Adonis (the sun and natural organic economy) reveals her ignorance. At the end of the poem, she comes to understand it a little bit better after Adonis is dead.

As a real-life example of this, we can say that our treatment of the oceans has not been in line with respectful, sensitive, thoughtful and knowledgeable engagement with nature since recently scientists have released a prediction that by 2048 all salt-water fish will be extinct due to plastic, climate change, acidification and pollution⁷. Largely, we will understand and really love Adonis, or nature, only after it is gone and dead. Moreover, the process of the extinction of the fish in the oceans and the killing off of nature and the planet is linked to our use of fossil fuels.

Use of fossil fuels, such as coal, is seen by Shakespeare as not congruent with real love and respect for nature. This love and respect is associated with the Divine Feminine, also known as the Goddess, and is opposed to monotheism, which asserts that the planet earth is a dead material object, disposable and to be detested and regretted, while heaven is far away in another realm.

The last instance of the word "coal" occurs four stanzas before the climax of the poem, the stanza where Venus' face "doth reek and smoke". In this last instance, as the sun is shortly to capitulate to the coal economy, the mood is

utterly elegiac. The lines are spoken by Adonis as he tries, wearily and in vain, to get Venus to leave him alone:

'Look, the world's comforter, with weary gait,
His day's hot task hath ended in the west;
The owl, night's herald, shrieks, 'Tis very late;'
The sheep are gone to fold, birds to their nest,
And coal-black clouds that shadow heaven's light
Do summon us to part and bid good night. (529 – 534)

The “coal-black clouds that shadow heaven's light” are of course, a metaphor for coal smoke blocking out the light of the sun. It is the end of the sun economy.

After this, Adonis gives Venus a lecture on the topic of love. Mainly, lust and casual sex, which Adonis asserts is Venus' approach to love, is contrasted with a gentler and more honest love, which is what he prefers. Adonis says:

I hate not love, but your device in love,
That lends embracements unto every stranger.
You do it for increase: O strange excuse!
When reason is the bawd to lust's abuse!

'Call it not love, for Love to heaven is fled,
Since sweating Lust on earth usurp'd his name;
Under whose simple semblance he hath fed
Upon fresh beauty, blotting it with blame;
Which the hot tyrant stains and soon bereaves,
As caterpillars do the tender leaves.

'Love comforteth like sunshine after rain,
But Lust's effect is tempest after sun;
Love's gentle spring doth always fresh remain,

Lust's winter comes ere summer half be done;
Love surfeits not, Lust like a glutton dies;
Love is all truth, Lust full of forged lies.

'More I could tell, but more I dare not say;
The text is old, the orator too green.
Therefore, in sadness, now I will away;
My face is full of shame, my heart of teen:
Mine ears, that to your wanton talk attended,
Do burn themselves for having so offended.' (789 – 810)

The love versus lust theme is a metaphor for attitudes towards the earth and nature. "Lust" symbolizes the rapacious capitalist fossil-fuel based economy while "love" symbolizes a thoughtful, respectful, spiritual and harmonious approach toward nature which Shakespeare felt was missing in 16th century England.

"You do it for increase" is a critique of the ever-growing economy and ever expanding human population, which was affecting the natural environment.

"Caterpillars" spoiling ("bereaving") the "tender leaves" was one of the main images Shakespeare often used for capturing coal's destructive qualities. He used it in *Romeo and Juliet*, where Romeo is compared to "the bud bit by an envious worm, ere he can spread his sweet leaves to the air or dedicate his beauty to the sun" (I.i.151 – 3). He used it several times in the Sonnets and he used it also in *Hamlet*, where Ophelia is told "the canker galls the infants of the spring too oft before their button be disclos'd" (I.ii.39 – 40) In the allegory (once it is deciphered) she is green nature and she dies young, destroyed by the dark forces at work in the court which are really coal in the allegory in that play. In fact, coal damaged gardens and plants: "the impact of the pollution on plant life was evident early on. One of the reasons Platt promoted his Colebales recipe in 1603 was to reduce damage to gardens" (Freese 37).

The line “Lust like a glutton dies” reminds us of an environmental situation where the planet’s resources are consumed at an ever accelerating pace until collapse—either slow or fast— occurs. For example, Global Footprint Network has been tracking “Earth Overshoot Day” since 1971 and calculated that “Earth Overshoot Day” this year in 2019 was the earliest ever:

On July 29 (2019), humanity will have used nature’s resource budget for the entire year, according to Global Footprint Network, an international sustainability organization that has pioneered the Ecological Footprint. It is Earth Overshoot Day. Its date has moved up two months over the past 20 years to the 29th of July this year, the earliest date ever.

Earth Overshoot Day falling on July 29th means that humanity is currently using nature 1.75 times faster than our planet’s ecosystems can regenerate. This is akin to using 1.75 Earths. Overshoot is possible because we are depleting our natural capital – which compromises humanity’s future resource security⁸.

The line, “More I could tell, but more I dare not say” hints at the Hermetic nature of the text, the hidden, heretical and daring messages in it, while “The text is old, the orator too green” points to the ecological difficulties often faced by people; by “green” Shakespeare means he is environmentally conscious.

“Therefore, in sadness, now I will away” shows Adonis leaving the scene — the sun economy makes a sad exit — right after the rapacious sexual contact with Venus. The boar does kill him but we only see Venus find his dead body and we do not see him die. Thus it is Venus, the British society embracing coal and capitalism, who is the culprit who really, textually, puts an ‘end’ to Adonis. The lines above are his last spoken lines and they are followed by this stanza, the very last where we see him alive:

With this he breaketh from the sweet embrace
Of those fair arms which bound him to her breast,
And homeward through the dark laund runs apace,
Leaves Love upon her back, deeply distress'd,
Look how a bright star shooteth from the sky,
So glides he in the night from Venus' eye. (811 – 6)

He is compared to a star because, in the conceit of this poem, he is the sun, which is a star. (Giordano Bruno had explained that the sun is a star.) "In the night" is a phrase which Hermetically symbolizes the coal smoke blotting out the sky. The sun economy and also a culture based on nature depart ("glides he in the night from Venus' eye"), where "the night" is coal.

As I noted, we do not see Adonis alive again. After he has been killed, Venus finds him: she "unfortunately spies/ The foul boar's conquest on her fair delight" (1030) and then she experiences a series of deep, almost cosmic shocks bound up with darkness: "her eyes as murder'd with the view/Like stars ashamed of day, themselves withdrew" (1031 – 2); "her eyes are fled/Into the deep-dark cabins of her head" (1037 – 8). She also exclaims: "Alas, poor world, what treasure hast thou lost!" (1075)

This symbolism expresses that a broad cultural grief hangs over the world as the energy transition away from the sun becomes more and more irreversible and profound. Capitalism, fossil fuels, loss of nature and ever less closeness to nature also lead people to change their own image of themselves away from "virtue". This change is shown in a metaphoric way in these lines:

Two glasses where herself herself beheld
A thousand times, and now no more reflect;
Their virtue lost, wherein they late excell'd,
And every beauty robb'd of his effect:
'Wonder of time,' quoth she, 'this is my spite,

That, thou being dead, the day should yet be light. (1129 – 1134)

Venus, the British society which unthinkingly banished the sun economy, now realizes that it has made a great mistake. However, the sun economy can't return now even though the sun is still shining: "wonder of time....the day should still be light". This echoes Romeo's line "Ah, dear Juliet/ Why art thou yet so fair?" (V.iii.101 – 2). The sun (Juliet) still shines but it no longer functions economically.

Venus has come to her senses and realizes what she has lost, but it is too late.

However, the wisdom she has gained from her experience allows her to make some prophecies. The extremes and paradoxes in the prophecies relate to her theme that "Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend" (1136). Once again this 'love' expresses the relationship between man and nature. As capitalism and fossil fuels have won, the love (the relationship with nature or the Goddess) cannot be a happy one. More and more pollution, issues with earth's systems such as the oceans and the atmosphere going out of balance and becoming dysfunctional, extreme economic and social inequality, boom and bust cycles, economic uncertainty since fossil fuels are limited, resource wars and other well-known ills we see today are the "sorrows" that Venus obliquely refers to, while the line "As dry combustious matter is to fire" (1162) is another veiled reference to coal:

'Since thou art dead, lo, here I prophesy:
Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend:
It shall be waited on with jealousy,
Find sweet beginning, but unsavoury end,
Ne'er settled equally, but high or low,
That all love's pleasure shall not match his woe.

It shall be fickle, false and full of fraud,
Bud and be blasted in a breathing-while;
The bottom poison, and the top o'erstraw'd
With sweets that shall the truest sight beguile:
The strongest body shall it make most weak,
Strike the wise dumb and teach the fool to speak.

'It shall be sparing and too full of riot,
Teaching decrepit age to tread the measures;
The staring ruffian shall it keep in quiet,
Pluck down the rich, enrich the poor with treasures;
It shall be raging-mad and silly-mild,
Make the young old, the old become a child.

'It shall suspect where is no cause of fear;
It shall not fear where it should most mistrust;
It shall be merciful and too severe,
And most deceiving when it seems most just;
Perverse it shall be where it shows most toward,
Put fear to valour, courage to the coward.

'It shall be cause of war and dire events,
And set dissension 'twixt the son and sire;
Subject and servile to all discontents,
As dry combustious matter is to fire:
Sith in his prime Death doth my love destroy,
They that love best their loves shall not enjoy.' (1135 – 1164)

Finally, in the last five stanzas, something supernatural and strange occurs: next to Venus, suddenly Adonis' dead body "was melted like a vapor from her sight/ and in his blood that on the ground lay spill'd/ A purple flow'r sprung up, check'ed with white, resembling well his pale lips and the blood..." (1166 – 9). Venus smells the flower and then she picks it and stows it away next to

her heart in a “hollow cradle” (1185) in her “breast” (1182). She vows “there shall not be one minute in an hour/ Wherein I will not kiss my sweet love’s flow’r” (1187–9).

What is the symbolism associated with this little purple and white flower? Obviously, since it has the same colors as Adonis and is called the son of Adonis, it must be related to the sun and to nature. Likely, it is ‘art’ or even this exact poem, a small and elegant thing of beauty which grows like magic out of the death of the sun economy and is cherished by the devastated and bereft society. This is Shakespeare’s view of his own art. Once again, it is a sort of ‘minima’ or microcosm: an allegorical and Mannerist representation of a larger entity (this poem and his work and in general, perhaps also art in general, which cherishes the culture of beauty and beautiful nature).

In the last stanza, Venus flies off:

Thus weary of the world, away she hies,
And yokes her silver doves, by whose swift aid
Their mistress mounted through the empty skies,
In her light chariot, quickly convey’d,
 Holding their course to Paphos, where their queen
 Means to immure herself, and not be seen.

How should Venus’ departure be viewed or, in Macherey’s terminology, “deciphered” within the sun vs. coal allegory? Although I’ve identified her as “British society”, it is more accurate to view her through time as both that culture plus all the successor cultures to the capitalist fossil-fuel using and market-oriented culture that developed in Britain around the 16th and 17th centuries.

For example, Michael Bristol writes that:

Shakespeare's authority is linked to the capacity of his works to represent the complexity of social time and value in the successor cultures of early modern England. One of the crucial features common to these successor cultures is the way individuals and institutions must constantly adapt to the exigencies of a market economy. Our extended dialogue with Shakespeare's works has been one of the important ways to articulate values more durable than those which circulate in current markets. (Bristol, xii)

Venus is therefore also our society, the global, fossil-fuel dependent and capitalist sort of thing we see now dominating commerce and politics on the planet now in 2019.

Her departure away from the scene and away, in a sense, also from the text itself, means that some sort of energy and economic transition would eventually occur and this sort of society would no longer be around. The energy transition from the sun to fossil fuel supported certain values: commerce, money, markets, and so on, as I explained in the early part of this paper. The energy transition back again from fossil fuels to the sun will support other values and these will indeed be more 'durable' because the sun is not nearly as finite as oil and coal. The fact that Venus will go "home" to Paphos, her city in Cypress, implies a return to what was before. In addition, she means to "not be seen", which is a sort of disappearing trick. The coal/fossil fuel based economy will one day disappear, never to be seen again.

Note

- 1 <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/no-series/survey-of-london-stow/1603/pp.69-91> (accessed 11/18/2018)
- 2 Kimura, Marianne, "Stand and Unfold Yourself: Prince Hamlet Unmasked" (March 2014, *Tsukuba University Area Studies Journal*, pp. 79-99. (This paper was also given as a presentation at Shakespeare 450, an academic conference sponsored by the Soci t  Francais Shakespeare, in Paris, April 24, 2014.) https://www.academia.edu/6937932/_Stand_and_Unfold_Yourself_Prince_Hamlet_Unmasked

- 3 page 1705, *The Riverside Shakespeare, Venus and Adonis*, footnote 1: “These lines, which appear on the title page, are from Ovid’s *Amores*, l.xv.35 – 6. Marlowe’s translation runs ‘Let base conceited wits admire vile things,/ Fair Phoebe lead me to the Muse’s springs” Evans, G. Blakemore, editor. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 1974.
- 4 “The rich in London tried to avoid using coal, still despised for its smoke, as long as they could. It was said in 1630 that thirty years earlier ‘the nice dames of London would not come into any house or room when sea coals were burned, nor willingly eat of the meat that was either sod or roasted with sea coal fire.’ Within a few years, though, the nice dames and the nice gents had succumbed. By the second decade of the 1600s, coal was widely used in the homes of the rich as well as of the poor”. *Coal: A Human History* by Barbara Freese, p. 33.
- 5 “in her naked bed” means “naked in her bed”...a common Elizabethan expression. Night clothes were not worn”: *The Riverside Shakespeare*, footnotes, p. 1709.
- 6 (Cynthia and Dian are the same goddess, and Shakespeare selects Diana because Bruno also selected her for his allegory using the Diana/Acataeon myth; Shakespeare used Bruno’s heretical pantheistic and polytheistic philosophy throughout his works.)
- 7 <https://earthmaven.io/sustainablehuman/old-story/salt-water-fish-extinction-seen-by-2048-Udxlu7LsXkisG0OmuzAbcA/> (accessed November 28, 2019).
- 8 <https://www.footprintnetwork.org/2019/07/23/press-release-july-2019/>

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