

“There is the Sulphurous Pit, Burning, Scalding, Stench”: *King Lear* is Climate Fiction

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In *Othello*, Iago boasts that:

The Moor already changes with my poison:
Dangerous conceits are, in their natures, poisons.
Which at the first are scarce found to distaste,
But with a little act upon the blood.
Burn like the mines of sulphur. (3.3.326 – 9)

The word “mines” and “sulphur” in proximity with the word “conceits” points to the hidden allegory¹ about coal (Iago) tricking Othello (man) into destroying nature (Desdemona). (Organically bound combinations of sulfur are present in all coal, and sulfur dioxide is released when coal is burned). Later on, after Othello realizes his enormous mistake, he cries:

Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
O Desdemona! Desdemona! dead!
Oh! Oh! Oh! (5.2.279 – 282)

As in the case of Iago’s lines about sulphur, Othello’s lines appear at a moment of strong emotional revelation and realization, and both contain the word “sulphur” and other concrete references to coal. Othello’s lines include

direct references to coal smoke, which were “blown about in winds”, while “steep down gulfs of liquid fire” references dangerous and fiery explosions in coal mines caused by methane gas leaks. “Roast me in fire” describes the combustion of coal. Othello’s existence depends on coal, and coal is deeply enmeshed and entangled with his existence. He has become coal in a way: “Blow *me* about in winds”.

Othello, probably written around 1604, was followed directly in 1605 by *King Lear*, where another eponymous tragic hero makes another agonizing speech in which again there are curious words that could reference coal and coal mining:

King Lear:There’s hell, there’s darkness,
There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding
Stench, consumption. Fie, fie, fie! pah, pah! (4.6.127–9)

In his *Glossary of Terms Used in Coal Mining* (1883), William Gresley defines “pit” as “1. a colliery, a shaft, a shallow hole, etc. 2. The workings, inclusive of all roads etc. and situated underground” (Gresley 187)². The word “pit” was definitely in use as a word with those coal-related meanings in Shakespeare’s time, as documents from then show.³ Other words like “stench”, “burning”, and “scalding” also recall coal, while “consumption” brings to mind lung diseases, which were caused by exposure to coal smoke. So Lear’s “sulphurous pit”, where one word strongly associated with coal is used to modify another word strongly associated with coal, indicates that another hidden allegory about coal and man and the sun is hidden beneath the surface of the play. *King Lear*, like *Othello*, is therefore covertly coal fiction, and portrays a timeline, starting with the adoption of the coal culture and economy, and ending with ruptures and discontinuities in a future when coal is no more.

The allegory is based on morality plays

The dynamics of the interactions of the characters in *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* all suggest that Shakespeare used the old morality plays as a schematic model. *Oxford Reference* explains that a morality play was "A kind of drama with personified abstract qualities as the main characters and presenting a lesson about good conduct and character, popular in the 15th and early 16th centuries".⁴ In particular, the heroes of morality plays, (abstractions with names like "Everyman" or "Youth"), are tempted or persuaded by the Vice characters (with names like "Riot" or "Mischief") to stray from the path of conventional religious piety. At the same time, Virtue characters (named "Good Deeds" or "Mercy", etc.) try in vain to persuade the protagonist to ignore the Vice, and, after he invariably follows the Vice's advice, the Virtues try to limit the ensuing damage.

Like Everyman, the tragic heroes of Shakespeare face fateful choices when a key character tries to persuade and tempt them to take action. Believe Iago? Go along with what Lady Macbeth proposes? Reward Regan and Goneril while banishing Cordelia? The answer is always yes. And imagery (darkness, night, smoke, stones, stench, fog, etc.) shows that these tragic choices are aligned with coal. Meanwhile, the Shakespearean Virtue characters (whose imagery clusters around sun, light, daylight, etc.) die in these tragedies. In Shakespeare's innovation of the morality plays, the moral compass is not aligned with Christian dogma or Biblical theology. Instead the environment, sustainability, clean air, and functioning and healthy nature are the supreme and best values.

The sun imagery surrounding the sun figures in the plays I have investigated so far is often multi-faceted. Juliet is figured as ladybirds and lambs and doves (the life in the countryside), and there are a fair number of references in *Romeo and Juliet* to gods like Apollo and Titan, giving her solar

identity a sacred dimension. On the other hand, the sun imagery surrounding Duncan, the king, is regal and agricultural: there is the “golden round” (1.4.28) of the crown and Duncan’s greeting (“Welcome hither!/I have begun to plant thee and will labor to make thee full of growing”) (1.4.26).

In *King Lear*, the oath which Lear swears as he disinherits Cordelia just one hundred lines into the play is one of the main clues that she is the sun figure:

King Lear: Let it be so: thy truth then be thy dow'r!
 For by *the sacred radiance of the sun*,
 The mysteries of Hecat and the night;
 By all operation of the orbs,
 From whom we do exist and cease to be;
 Here I disclaim all my paternal care...” (1.1.108 – 112) (my emphasis)

As Lear swears this oath to Cordelia by the sun, he becomes separated from the sun (because she is banished through his own actions, representing the separation of humans from the sun economy and sun or nature based religion) and he also unwittingly puts himself into existential danger (“from whom we do exist and cease to be”).

The reference to Hecat is fascinating because it is also a reference to the goddess Diana, the most important goddess in Shakespearean imagery. Diana is considered a triple deity, merged with a goddess of the moon (Luna/Selene) and the underworld (Hecate). The goddess Diana, the main goddess who appears again and again in references wherever female heroines are found in Shakespeare’s plays⁵ signals that these female characters evoke the Divine Feminine. Specifically, the Shakespearean Divine Feminine is based on the goddess Diana as Bruno conceives of her in *Gli Heroici Furori* (1583), in his retelling of the myth of Actaeon and Diana. Hecate was the goddess of witches, crossroads and the dead, associated with the moon in its dark phase.

She is a mysterious and otherworldly figure, and Lear’s invocation of her, insofar as he uses her darkness as a weapon against his own daughter, foreshadows the tragedy as well as subtly identifying Cordelia with the goddess Diana and the Divine Feminine.

Then Lear swears that:

....The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbor’d, pitied, and relieved,
As thou my sometime daughter” (1.1.116 – 129)

The term “makes his generation messes” means more specifically “eat one’s children”. The idea is that future populations will experience shrinkage as they deal with the accumulated results of basing an economy on fossil fuels.

Cordelia’s hidden identity as the sun is hinted later in Act 4 when Kent and a character named simply “Gentleman” are discussing her reaction to a letter:

Kent: O then (the letter) moved her.
Gent.: Not to a rage, patience and sorrow (strove)
Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears
Were like a better way: those happy smiles
That play’d on her ripe lip seem’d not to know
What guests were in her eyes, which, parted thence,
As pearls from diamonds dropp’d..... (4.3.15 – 22)
.....
.....There she shook
The holy water from her heavenly eyes,
And, clamor-moistened, then away she started.... (4.3.29 – 30)

Throughout the play, sun and water are both associated with Cordelia. In Act 1, Cordelia mentions her own “washed eyes” (1.1.268); in Act 4, Lear says to her “Be your tears wet? Yes, faith, I pray, weep not” (4.7.69–70) and later Lear tells her “wipe thine eyes!” (5.3.23). “Sunshine and rain at once” and “clamor-moistened” again brings water into the nature imagery surrounding Cordelia, which is apt, since natural planetary systems don’t just work through the sun, but also water is needed. This rain is “holy water” and it is “heavenly”. As I noted earlier, Shakespeare has replaced pious monotheistic ideas of heaven with the notion that nature is sacred, and, since his tragedies make predictions about the future, he posits that a functioning planet, with rain and living oceans, would become the ultimate moral goal of people. *King Lear* can therefore be considered climate fiction as well as coal fiction because it references the weather and the preciousness of rain in the context of a planet affected by the ravages of coal.

An evocative solar image surrounding Cordelia is the question “Fair daylight?” (4.7.51), spoken by Lear as he meets her again in the famous recognition scene:

Doctor: He’s scarce awake, let him alone a while.
 Lear: Where have I been? Where am I? Fair daylight?
 I am mightily abus’d; I should ev’n die with pity
 To see another thus. I know not what to say.
 I will not swear these are my hands. Let’s see,
 I feel this pin prick. Would I were assur’d
 Of my condition!
 Cordelia: O, look upon me, sir,
 And hold your hand in benediction o’er me.
 No, sir, you must not kneel.
 Lear: Pray do not mock me. (4.7.49–59)

Like the religious words (palmer, pray, holy, shrine) playfully exchanged between Romeo and Juliet when they first meet, this scene shows a similar technique: religious words and a sense of reverence and care, but no conventional signs of religion. Only once the time line of the history of man and the sun is recognized in *Romeo and Juliet* do we see that Shakespeare has used the religious words to indicate or portray a stage in man's history when nature was religious and sacred. Now, in *King Lear*, religious words like "benediction", "kneel" and "pray" are clustered together and reveal Shakespeare's hidden speculation that in the future people will take a religious or spiritual attitude towards nature after fossil fuels go out of style.

Importantly, in the sources Shakespeare used for *King Lear*, Cordelia does not die, and Shakespeare's change of the plot in this important way also points to the existence of a hidden morality play which follows the same pattern he used in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, where the sun figures (the sun economy) die tragically due entirely to the poor choices made by the tragic hero.

Lear's Fool

When a knight tells Lear, "Since my young lady's going into France, sir, the Fool hath much pin'd away", (1.5.73 – 74), we can first discern the nature of the link between Cordelia (the economic and spiritual way of life supported by the sun) and Lear's fool. To understand the strength and background of this bond, first some cultural history of the fool or clown character in general in England is necessary:

Taken all together, the peculiarities of the clowning figure can hardly derive from Christian sources or be understood as later "comic" accretions. Nor, in the view of the relationship between the fool of the May procession, the

Mummer's play, or the Morris dance, and the sword play, can they be explained in terms of the continuity of the ancient (Greek) fool as seen, for example, in the *mimus*.Consequently, the origins of the fool in the folk play must be sought in that native tradition of mimetic ritual that is of central importance to all popular dramatic or semi-dramatic activities. It is this background that explains the relationship between the fool's motley and the pagan traditions of vegetation magic, and throws considerable light on some of his most enduring accoutrements, such as the calf's hide....the ubiquitous coxcomb....the antlers...the horns, donkey ears, and the foxtail..." (Weimann 31)

Elsewhere Weimann makes note of "the processional function and ritual significance of" (31) fools or clown figures in older dramatic forms such as May Day festivals. These festivals were seasonal rites where the sun both supplied and retained a central significance. Lear's fool makes his first entrance with the line "Let me hire him too, here's my coxcomb" (1.4.95), calling direct attention to his traditional roots, and he makes his appearance just as Lear's relationships with Goneril and Regan are beginning to sour. The fool dies at the same time as Cordelia, and in the same way: "And my poor fool is hang'd!" (5.3.306). Shakespeare therefore preserves the traditional ritual (seasonal, sun-based) function of Lear's fool through his close association with Cordelia, the sun figure: moreover, the presence of the Fool indicates Lear's distance or closeness from the economic way of life sustained by the sun. When Lear banishes Cordelia, the Fool is nowhere in sight, indicating Lear's ontological distance then from the rural traditions of ritual and early drama (and a sun-based economy). Regan and Goneril, whose proverb-poor speech Weimann links with their roles as representatives of "the new age of scientific inquiry and scientific development" (237), particularly detest the Fool, and Goneril calls him "all-licens'd" (1.4.201), in her eyes a criticism. Her action also recalls the Puritans of Shakespeare's own times, who successfully campaigned

for the suppression of older communal seasonal rites and rituals, and wanted to close the theaters.

The Fool disappears in Act 3 before Cordelia reappears in Act 4, meaning that these two never meet, and may have been played by the same actor therefore, to underscore their connection. The Fool conducts Lear back to the sun (Cordelia) and because of his evolutionary connections to rural and ancient folkish drama forms, he is uniquely qualified to do so. Finally, the Fool’s last spoken line is “And I’ll go to bed at noon” (3.6.85) which both points to his connection with the sun, which reaches its apex at noon, and foreshadows his death (bed) and Cordelia’s, too.

The long episode where Lear, controlled by Regan and Goneril, (and still separated from Cordelia), is guided and accompanied by his Fool shows the central problem at hand in London of the time. The purely sun-based economy was in the past but a sense of alienation from nature, festivals, the countryside, was perhaps unwelcome and destabilizing. There was hardly a remedy: emergent and collective behavior and the availability of a new, attractive and powerful resource dictated new terms to everyone. Materials, especially powerful fuels, have agency, and our material existence may become deeply entangled and enmeshed with these materials once we start using them. How, then, to cope? How to keep one’s sense of fun and pleasure when all around one the new competitive-minded, strict and disapproving culture and inherent structures of the new coal-based economy (i.e. Goneril and Regan) was banishing festive occasions, seasonal rituals, natural rhythms, and communal ties? *King Lear* provides an answer: the theater!

The Fool tells Lear after doffing his coxcomb, “Nay, and thou canst not smile as the wind sits, thou’lt catch cold shortly” (1.4.101), and he means technically, as footnotes traditionally claim, that Lear should “ingratiate himself with the party in power” (Evans 1262). But more generally, the Fool’s advice supplies a

rationale (despite more difficult urban lifestyles, pollution and coal smoke) for maintaining theatrical entertainments for pleasure, which merely by their very existence deeply recall that “the festive element and ritual origins of audience contact” (Weimann 237).

For-profit, necessary, self-mocking, ironic, parodying, often subversive, witty, but without political power, Lear’s Fool opens our eyes to some of the communal and folk values that popular music and movies, and popular culture and art in general, including *King Lear* and Shakespeare’s plays, have retained in industrialized countries to this day. “Our extended historical dialogue with Shakespeare’s works has been one of the important ways to articulate values more durable than those which circulate in current markets”, writes Michael Bristol (xii), implicitly drawing fossil fuels, those things which make “current markets” current, into the picture. What is more durable than the sun? Certainly not coal.

Coal depicted in sulphur and stones

The fool speaks in proverbs but Goneril and Regan, who have “discarded the form and content of popular wisdom” (Weimann 236 – 7) rarely use these forms of speech (Weimann 236). Beyond this fact (which puts them in opposition to the Fool-Cordelia-Sun), a few other images relates the sisters to their roles as coal within the Everyman-Sun-Coal morality play within *King Lear*.

First of all, the smoke, fumes, and darkness of overt coal imagery as seen in *Macbeth* or *Othello* are not seen in *King Lear*. As in *Macbeth* and *Othello*, the word “coal” does not appear once in *King Lear*. Covert coal imagery is found in direct connection with Goneril and Regan in the opening scenes, when they are referred to as “metal” (1.1.69) and “jewels “ (1.1.268), hard shiny things which have physical properties that are similar to those of stones, which

appear later and are very important.

As the play opens, Lear is dividing up his kingdom, hinting of the enclosure acts. Cordelia, symbolizing the sun that sustained a feudal society, is driven off. Her inability to embroider language or spin artful rhetoric is a metaphor for the simple straightforwardness of the solar based economy. Her sisters are capable of verbal complexity; their verbal skill may be a symbol for the shallower benefits of education: social polish, strategizing, impressing others. Coal’s fundamental underlying role in triggering the enclosures was unspoken (it obviated the need for forests; populations could grow and cities could become markets for agricultural produce), and likewise Shakespeare did not need to explicitly mention coal or related imagery in the first scene. Terence Hawkes loosely draws the connection between the map Lear uses and the new way of thinking, a new expression of individuality:

“give me the map there”, can be said virtually to present to its pre-literate society a whole way of life — its own — grotesquely reduced to and barbarically treated as a mere physical diagram. At this point, the play’s project becomes far more complex than the exploration of an old man’s foolishness. The map helps to push it beyond the range of mere personal psychology, beyond the walls of the theater, into the public domain. (Hawkes 5)

Goneril and Regan become more associated with coal indirectly later in the play. Words like “sulphurous”, “pit”, “stench”, and “consumption” can be related back to Goneril and Regan through other associations, thereby linking the sisters to the fossil fuel.

For example, in Act 3, Scene 2, Lear, by now disillusioned with Regan and Goneril, (who have refused to feed and lodge Lear’s men and have taken a harsh position towards their father), sets out in a storm with only his Fool. The first major speech by Lear when he is out in this storm contains the jarring

word “sulph’rous”:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!
 You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
 Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned our cocks!
 You *sulph’rous* and thought-executing fires
 Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o’ the world!
 Crack nature’s moulds, all germains spill at once
 That makes ingrateful man!..... (3.2.1 – 9) (my emphasis)

In his use of meteorology, Lear is entirely mistaken, since thunderstorms simply cannot give off sulfur. However, as I mentioned before, coal smoke does contain sulfur, and the word “sulph’rous” would certainly have brought to mind “coal” in Londoners of the day. “In 1598 in his *Survey of London*, John Stow noted..... the vast encampments of smoky hovels and workshops” (Bryson 46); this was most probably coal smoke since coal was rapidly taking the place of wood fuel in the city and producing what Nef refers to as “an early industrial revolution” (165) in England and particularly in London. Lear’s speech ends with the incantation “Crack nature’s molds! All germains spill at once/That make ingrateful man!” (3.2.8 – 9); although he doesn’t mention their names, this word “ingrateful” can be applied to (ungrateful) Goneril and Regan. They are therefore associated with sulphur (and coal) indirectly.

Also, the idea of “our steeples” being drenched, exposed as powerless in nature, again contains the idea of Shakespeare’s removal of Christian theology and piety from a future where people face problems relating to their survival due to the depletion of fossil fuels and the condition nature has come to due to fossil fuels. It is interesting that Macbeth, in a similar state of vexation and

difficulty says to the witches: "Though you untie the winds and let them fight/ Against the churches.....answer me/ To what I ask you" (4.1.52 – 3). Again, both of these plays contain an image of nature in the future wrecking, or at least fighting against, the pious Christian religious buildings: churches, steeples.

Moreover, the lamenting about ungrateful people could additionally be Shakespeare's own 'voicing of a sigh', expressing his ritual lament that people could not be content with the sun alone.

The next occasion of "sulphurous" is even more evocative of the world of coal. This time, the image is related to sexuality, and through this sexual notion, the image is linked to Goneril. The speech is Lear's famous soliloquy in Act 4. Lear is now mad and the "man" whose life he pardons is a figment of his imagination:

Lear:...I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?
Adultery?
Thou shalt not die. Die for adultery? No,
The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly
Does lecher in my sight.
Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son
Was kinder to his father than my daughters
Got 'tween the lawful sheets.
To't, luxury, pell-mell, for I lack soldiers.
Behold yond simp'ring dame,
Whose face between her forks presages snow;
That minces virtue, and does shake the head
To hear of pleasure's name —
The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to't
With a more riotous appetite.
Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
Though women all above;

But to the girdle do the gods inherit,
 Beneath is all the fiends': there's hell, there's darkness,
 There is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,
 Stench, consumption, Fie! fie! fie! pah! pah!
 Give me an ounce of civet; good apothecary
 Sweeten my imagination. There's money for thee." (4.6.118–129) (my
 emphasis)

The description, made when Lear has just entered "*mad, crowned with weeds and flowers*" (4.6.80), and therefore speaking with unusual license and abandon (and revealing the truth, therefore), recalls Albany's recent insult to his wife Goneril, "See thyself, devil!/Proper deformity shows not in the fiend/So horrid as in woman" (4.2.59–61). Second, it is somewhat of a satire of Duessa, from the pious epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590), whose "nether parts (are) misshapen, monstrous" (Spenser 103).

Lear's ostensible point is to criticize hypocrisy in sexual matters, but he is clearly being sarcastic and he ridicules the idea that fitchews or horses or any animal (by implication including people) should be judged for having sexuality. His speech also seems "mad" in the sense there is nothing in mythology that supplies either women or Centaurs with a dark stinking pit or a fire of "hell" for their lower anatomy. He ends the speech with the line, "Give me an ounce of civet; good apothecary/Sweeten my imagination", which further indirectly mocks Spenser and the moralistic outlook of the *Fairy Queene*, for having a dirty mind.

An identical critique of western moralistic attitude toward sexuality is seen in Giordano Bruno's critique of Christianity: "[Christianity teaches that] Nature is a whorish prostitute, that natural law is ribaldry, that Nature and Divinity cannot concur in one and the same good end...." (Bruno, *The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*, 255). Again, Cordelia, the Divine Feminine,

is missing, and so the situation with Lear, who symbolizes humanity (of course only in the west, or “Christendom”), means that patriarchy becomes hypertrophied. The “simpling dame...whose face presages snow” exhibits outwardly a moralistic and icily chaste attitude toward sexuality which was then considered admirable in British patriarchal society. However, through this repression, a real understanding of people as natural creatures is lost and connection with nature and our human nature suffers.

In his madness, he has spoken the truth and he has used the imagery of a “sulphurous pit”, of stench, of consumption. All of these items belong to the world of coal — either coal mining (the pit) or coal smoke (stench) or coal’s health effects (consumption).⁶ The images might be lightly connected with the idea of coal in the audience’s mind (either subconsciously or consciously), and this effect would be a theatrical one, occurring as the performance unfolds, but maybe forgotten after a moment. The implicit message: unpleasant and dangerous, coal has a hidden and terrible side, belonging to a “fiend” and originating in “hell”. Miners in English seventeenth-century coal mines often believed that the “inexplicable disasters that plagued them were due to demons and goblin haunting the mines” (Freese 47). Just as Duessa might come to the audience’s mind during this speech, along with the work she is a part of and the larger meanings and social ground covered by that epic poem, so too, the idea of coal — its mining, its smoke, and its health effects, and rumors about its connections to the underworld, would also rise briefly into the audience’s awareness.

About 200 lines before this important speech of Lear’s, Goneril is called a “fiend” twice by her husband, the Duke of Albany, who criticizes her for treating Lear badly:

Albany: See thyself, devil!

Proper deformity [shows] not in the fiend
 So horrid as in woman.
 Goneril: O vain fool!
 Albany: Thou changed and self-cover'd thing, for shame
 Bemonster not thy feature. Were't my fitness
 To let these hands obey my blood,
 They are apt enough to dislocate and tear
 Thy flesh and bones. Howe'er thou art a fiend,
 A woman's shape doth shield thee. (4.2.59–67)

“A woman’s shape”, the notion of “bemonster”, the word “fiend”, and the general ranting against women (“so horrid as in woman”), all find echoes in Lear’s “there is the sulphurous pit” speech which occurs soon after this exchange. But actually Shakespeare is careful to associate Goneril with the themes of “monster” and “fiend” even earlier. In Act 1, Lear tells Goneril, “Ingratitude! Thou marble-hearted fiend/ More hideous when thou show’st thee in a child/ Than the sea-monster” (1.4.259–61). Indirectly, then, Goneril, linked to the image of fiend and monster and woman would be linked to the “sulphurous pit” image as well, and therefore to coal.

Lear, disillusioned by Goneril and Regan, no longer cares if he upholds polite behavior and rectitude; his nobility is meaningless. In the secret morality play, (which plays out over the future as fossil fuels first are popular but lose their appeal), simultaneously going on beneath the surface, Lear’s allegorical double, Everyman, has reached a similar place of exile and alienation from nature. He feels disillusioned with coal fires, coal smoke and coal mining, but also he has an absolute dependence on coal: Regan and Goneril may be despised and hated, but they also are in power. Without them to give him shelter, Lear has nothing; he is a “poor bare, fork’d animal” (2.4.106), as Londoners, living without forests, fields, and mountains would have been truly

bereft without coal. The resilience of sustainable and natural rural communities is therefore understood to be sadly missing. Also, the journey back to the sun (the reunion with Cordelia) for Lear is shown as very long indeed; the process of fossil fuel depletion is slow and agonizing, yet also too fast (and ending with imprisonment), as no one who has grown used to their conveniences can tolerate their absence, especially when there is no good substitute available.

Finally the most powerful line connecting coal to the tragic ending is Lear's "O, you are men of stones!" (5.3.258), spoken as he denounces those present on the stage and, incidentally, the audience as well. Note that he does not say "O, you are men of stone". (The ordinary expression, "a heart of stone" of course, means an unmerciful disposition or a cruel one.)

Shakespeare uses an ingenious and old theatrical technique of drawing the audience in as participants. The technique goes farther back than the days of the Wakefield Master and his *Magnus Herodes*, (performed until 1579 when the Mystery Cycles were abolished by Puritans) but Weimann's description of the way this play must have appeared gives us an example of the ways spectators became part of the performance in a play Shakespeare (who uses the line "out-Herods Herod" (3.2.14) in *Hamlet*) may have seen as a boy in Coventry (Greenblatt 37):

But as (Herod) mingles with the audience and rages in the open street, he forfeits the reverence and the menace of his station and almost surrenders the representational dimension of his role. At the same time, the audience is drawn into the play and given the role of frightened subjects. In York and Wakefield, for instance, the audience was even supposed to go down on its knees. But the terror that it experiences is a mock fright performed in sport. The intermingling of dramatic illusion and theatrical convention unites the impersonation of the role with the re-enactment of festive release in such a

way that the two faces of Herod — the funny and the frightening — become inseparable. The aesthetic effect is close to life and, at the same time, highly complex. (Weimann 72)

“(Coal) was called ‘the best stone in Britain’ by one Roman writer because it could easily be carved and polished into beautiful jewelry” (Freese 15). In *Romeo and Juliet*, (a play which is an allegory about coal, the sun, and man) Friar Lawrence refers to “stones” in the lines “O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies/In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities” (2.3.15–6). Stones are given prominent place in *Macbeth*, as Macbeth mentions them when he is on his way to kill Duncan: “The very stones prate of my whereabouts” (2.1.58). And coal does appear rather like a stone: hard, black and coming from the ground.

Lear’s powerful denunciation, “O, you are men of stones!” then is meant to include the whole audience as people who burn coal and by doing so are implicated in allowing the sun economy, Cordelia, to ‘die’. Thus the “festive release” which Weimann points to in the Herod performance would therefore here occur in a performance of *King Lear* as well, but in a less obvious way. The audience might not consciously pick up on the vocabulary (stones=coal) and the message (*you* burn coal!) directly, but the truth of their inclusion as coal users (in conjunction with other images of sulfur and so forth in the play) could have rung a bell somewhere in the subconscious. At the same time, by ritually enacting an emotional and public (though cloaked and covert) denunciation of coal, there would be a subversive kind of exorcism of coal as a force or presence in London and the world, even if only a figurative one, occurring in the theater on stage and in the audience simultaneously. Lear repeats the singular form of the word (“stone”) for emphasis a few lines later: “She’s dead as earth. Lend me a looking glass/If that her breath will mist or

stain the stone/Why then she lives" (5.3.263–5). The hard "metal", "jewel", "looking glass" and "stone" associations, like money, like coal (that is to say, Regan and Goneril, the Vice figures of the hidden morality play) have vanquished the softer, natural "mist" and "sunshine and rain" (Cordelia, the Virtue) associations of the bountiful nature, namely, the "earth".

Some critics many decades ago speculated on some mysterious "subliminal" message being conveyed through imagery in Shakespeare. For example, in *Shakespeare After All*, Marjorie Garber describes how:

Shakespeare scholars like Caroline Spurgeon (*Shakespeare's Imagery*, 1935) and Wolfgang Clemen (*The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*, 1951) charted patterns of Shakespeare's imagery within and across the plays, suggesting a kind of subliminal theme or subtext of images, governed not by the conscious choices of individual characters but by an underlying dynamic, a kind of imagistic unconscious, that undercut as often as it supported the aims and agency of the dramatic speakers. (705)

I would like to propose a more accurate word than "subliminal" for Shakespeare's efforts. The word "subliminal" is linked with subconscious trickery, something more commonly associated with slick marketing campaigns or sleight of hand. A more accurate term is "Hermetic". Hermeticism can be thought of as "a word to the wise" that deals with obscure, occult or esoteric knowledge, or even as a subtle type of code called "steganography". (Steganography is the technique of hiding secret data within an ordinary, non-secret, file or message in order to avoid detection; the secret data is then extracted at its destination.⁷) Those wise enough to understand what he was getting at by having words like "sulphurous pits" being shouted in anger on stage by a miserable figure in dire straits due to his nasty and selfish daughters would probably also grasp the significance of phrases like "fair

daylight” and “sacred radiance of the sun” being uttered in relation to Cordelia, the kind and loving daughter.

Rationality and coal

Terence Hawkes makes the excellent point that Lear’s idea to measure the love of his daughters by their speeches is turned against him when they apply the same “withering, reductive nature of instrumental assessing reason that Lear has unleashed upon the world” (Hawkes 39). In the coal allegory, the choice of coal brought complexity which then determined a new scientific approach to the world; yet perhaps, as the fuel depleted (symbolized by the selfishness of Goneril and Regan in refusing to give room and board to more and more of Lear’s knights), the strict rules of geological depletion of coal would bring more rationality than people had bargained for.

“Thou, Nature, art my goddess....”

In *Will in the World*, Stephen Greenblatt cleverly identifies Autolycus, the trickster and peddler in *The Winter’s Tale*, as a mask for Shakespeare himself:

Where is Shakespeare in this strange story, a story lifted from his old rival Robert Greene? In part, he seems playfully to peer out at us behind the mask of a character he added to Greene’s story, the rogue Autolycus, the trickster and peddler and “snapper-up of unconsidered trifles” (4.3.25–26). As a fragment of wry authorial self-representation, Autolycus is the player stripped of the protection of a powerful patron and hence revealed for what he is: a shape-changing vagabond and thief. He embodies the playwright’s own sly consciousness of the absurdity of his trade: extracting pennies from the pockets of naïve spectators gaping at the old statue trick stolen from a rival. (371)

Besides “sun figures”, “coal figures” and “mankind figures”, another

important category of allegorical characters is found in Shakespeare’s plays: those characters who discreetly speak for Shakespeare, or peer out from behind a mask and explain the playwright’s point of view using clever double entendre. Prince Hamlet is the most developed one of these, but there are so many more. In *King Lear*, this character is Edmund, the illegitimate son of Gloucester. In Act 1, Edmund explains his ambitious aims to get his legitimate half-brother’s inheritance:

Edmund: Thou, Nature, art my goddess, to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam’s issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition, and fierce quality,
Than doth within a dull, stale, tired bed
Go to th’ creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got ‘tween asleep and wake? Well then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.
Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund.
As to th’ legitimate. Fine word “legitimate”!
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base
Shall top th’ legitimate. I grow, I prosper:
Now, gods, stand up for bastards! (1.2.1 – 22)

It is only possible to think that Shakespeare, with the words “composition”

and “invention”, here refers (in disguise) to himself as an artist. It is *he* who grows and *he* who prospers by his (by the time of *King Lear*) notable and brilliant artistic success. The stage and the theater may have been considered by aristocrats a “base” sort of entertainment in comparison to courtly poetry (“a tribe of fops”), but Shakespeare (properly) defends the theater here, and in *King Lear*, also he shows how drama, developed over centuries through ritual and the festive element, (from simpler societies sustained only by solar-based economies), has its own peculiar and emergent power to sympathetically embody his simple, but elegant message of an emergent and ancient cosmic natural system, a continuum in time and space, still unfolding.

Furthermore, Edmund’s character continues to reveal Shakespeare, the artist, from the shadows for the rest of the play. Edmund conspires with Goneril and Regan, the elite powers of his time and place, though he does not care about them, as perhaps Shakespeare was not emotionally close to the urban and sophisticated political elite who admired his work and supported him financially. Edmund betrays his father, Gloucester, just as Shakespeare may have felt that living in London was a betrayal of his own ‘rural’ and ‘solar’ values. Edmund finally converts to Lear’s and Cordelia’s side, but, too late: “Quickly send.... to th’ castle, for my writ is on the life of Lear and Cordelia” (5.3.245–7). And Cordelia dies, while Lear follows her minutes later. Edmund’s “writ” is another clue that Shakespeare hides behind Edmund’s mask.

Letters and writings appearing in Shakespeare’s plays are sometimes clever allegorical references to Shakespeare’s plays themselves. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Lawrence writes a letter to Romeo, exiled in Mantua, informing him that Juliet is alive. This letter can be compared to the play itself, composed by Shakespeare and sent out to mankind in 1596. Like the letter, the play’s underlying message that the sun is viable and should be our main source

of energy will “go missing” while fossil fuels rule: Shakespeare’s oblique and implied prediction is that the solar allegory in *Romeo and Juliet* would also be hidden and obscured. We also know that Prince Hamlet writes deviously, for example when he replaces the written order (which Claudius has given to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern commanding Hamlet’s death) with one he writes instead that commands the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This order can also be seen as a symbol of the whole play of *Hamlet*, which uses ruses and puzzle-like devices to covertly convey anti-fossil fuel and heretical anti-Christian messages (within an innocent play about intrigues at the Danish court) that would only become socially acceptable after hundreds of years had passed. Therefore, the “writ” on the life of Cordelia and Lear is allegorically the whole play *King Lear* itself, another story of mankind and the sun.

Keeping in mind the heretical messages that Shakespeare seems to have taken artistic pleasure in conveying covertly in his plays, we can read Edgar’s speech where he (in disguise with his armor on, so no one knows his identity) accuses Edmund of being a “toad-spotted traitor” (5.3.139) in a new light:

Edgar:.....Despite thy victor-sword and fire-new fortune,
Thy valor, and thy heart, thou art a traitor;
False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father,
Conspirant 'gainst this high illustrious prince,
And from th'extremest upward of thy head
To the descent and dust below thy foot,
A most toad-spotted traitor....” (5.3.133 – 139)

Using Edmund, Shakespeare here admits that himself is also a “conspirant” against fossil fuels (the face of power, then as now), that he is false to Christianity, the state religion of his time; he was a “toad-spotted traitor” who

spoke truth to power, in short.

Edmund, in fighting form, of course, at first denies Edgar's charges:

Edmund: In wisdom I should ask thy name,
 But thy outside looks so fair and warlike,
 And that thy tongue some say of breeding breathes,
 What safe and nicely I might well delay
 By rule of knighthood, I disdain and spurn.
 Back do I toss these treasons to thy head..... (5.3.142 – 147)

Edgar and Edmund fight, and Edmund is fatally wounded, though he does not die immediately. Albany then takes out Goneril's treasonous letter implicating Edmund in a plot to have Albany killed. At this point, seemingly with relish Edmund says, "what you have charg'd me with, that have I done, and more, much more, the time will bring it out" (5.3.163 – 165). In fact, Edmund ends up admitting to his own treachery, and likewise, by implication, Shakespeare admits with pride to his own heresies against Christianity and fossil fuels. Moreover, "the time will bring it out" carries with it the idea that a story waits to be told, or that time will unveil the truth. This concept is resonant with Hamlet's plea to Horatio at the end of that play:

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
 Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
 Absent thee from felicity for a while,
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
 To tell my story. (5.2.344 – 349)

Edmund, the character who orchestrated and plotted so much, who had appeared to side with the enemy on the way but whose heart is shown to be in

the right place after all, is slain by Edgar, his half-brother, in a duel.

Finally, with a jest at his own expense, Shakespeare lets his alter ego die:

Messenger: Edmund is dead, my lord.

Albany: That's but a trifle here. (5.3.295 – 6)

But the message is not all gloomy. Lear dies, but the death of Lear represents only the end of a certain viewpoint or collective attitude of egotistical superiority that humans expressed until the end of fossil fuels. Edgar, a humble and modest individual who will, as the play ends, "rule in this realm and the gor'd state sustain" (5.3.321) represents a more hopeful future for people.

Note

- 1 Kimura, Marianne. "Othello, Iago, fossil fuels and New Materialism". Asian Shakespeare Association conference, November 2020, Seoul, Republic of Korea. Unpublished conference paper.
https://www.academia.edu/44461346/Othello_Iago_fossil_fuels_and_New_Materialism
- 2 William Stukeley Gresley. *A Glossary of Terms Used in Coal Mining*. London. K. and F.N. Spon, 16 Charing Cross. 1883.
<https://archive.org/details/glossaryoftermsu00gresrich/page/186/mode/2up>
(accessed 10/2/2021)
- 3 The owners of a coal mine complained that "the greatest quantity of coles are now wrought at further pytts then they were the last yeare" (Dendy quoted in Nef, 27). From Dendy's Introduction to *Extracts from Records of the Company of Hostmen of Newcastle upon Tyne* (Publications of Surtees Soc. vol. cv, 1901) p. 59. Quoted in J.U. Nef's *The Rise of the British Coal Industry*, vol. 1, Frank Cass & Co. Abingdon, Oxon. 1932.
- 4 <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100208805>
(accessed 10/5/2021).
- 5 Kimura Marianne. "The #metoo moment in Shakespeare scholarship: Giordano Bruno's Gli Eroici Furori and the Divine Feminine in Love's Labor Lost".
https://www.academia.edu/36451532/The_metoo_moment_in_Shakespeare_scholarship_Giordano_Brunos_Gli_Eroici_Furori_and_the_Divine_Feminine_in_Loves_Labors_Lost
- 6 Freese, "Evelyn wrote that soot produced consumptions that killed "multitudes," and asserted that almost half of all those who died in London died of certain lung disorders"

p. 38.

7 <https://searchsecurity.techtarget.com/definition/steganography>

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