

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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The Themes in Shakespeare

## GREED

Shakespeare was sensitive to many expressions of greed—political, as in the power struggles within Henry VIII's court, or in Duke Frederick's ambitions, in *As you Like It*; psycho-social as in the cases of King Lear or Timon of Athens, who made crippling demands on other people's spiritual generosity; or lusty garden-variety greed of Falstaff's type, the greed for cash, a good spin in the hay, and a place to stay. As an essential sin, in the religious thought of Shakespeare's (and our) time, greed involved the closure of the self to others, by prioritizing one's own needs at others' expense.

(TIMON OF ATHENS; KING LEAR; THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR; HENRY VIII)

**AS YOU LIKE IT** The provocation to this wonderful play about love and joy is provided by the driver of greed. And competitiveness. Duke Frederick has nudged his brother out of the way, for control of their hereditary duchy. Greed and then vindictiveness seem to have pushed the Duke to exile his brother and his retinue, as well as his niece Rosalind. He is thwarted, in the end, by the insistence of his daughter, Celia, to follow her dear friend Rosalind. In the end Duke Frederick has made so many enemies that he repents his greed and power politics.

**TIMON OF ATHENS** Timon of Athens first appears to us as a wealthy man who loves to share his wealth. But as time goes on he observes that his guests and friends do not reciprocate. Eventually he concludes that people are indifferent to him, and he retires into the distant bush, sets himself up in a cave, starts life as a primitive and for a long time refuses to accept any human company. The greed which met his generosity has turned him into a beast.

**KING LEAR** Aging and petulant, King Lear begins a final account of his life, assessing his final stage. Since above all he wants love, which consoles, he turns to his three daughters, to determine whether or not they love him; in the background of this issue is of course the question of inheritance. Who gets what? Upon inquiring of his daughters, one by one, he learns that the first two, whom he loves least, heartily profess their love for him. However his third daughter, Cordelia, demurs when asked whether she loves her father. Her father is shocked by what he takes to be reservations, but what in fact is the beginning of an honest reply, by the daughter who in fact loves him greatly. The King's fury, grief, and inner demand—inside him he insists on hearing an unqualified 'I love you,' from the daughter he loves best—drives him mad. His greed for a certain consoling answer is overwhelming.

**THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR** Just as Falstaff is greedy for life, in *Henry IV, Part I*, so he is greedy for money and middle aged women in this play. Arriving broke at an inn in a country village, Falstaff unfolds a plan—he will initiate it through letters—to snare the affections and cash of two of the leading matrons of the village. The way his plans fail leaves him the fool and laughing stock of the region.

**HENRY VIII** The ingredients for greed-driven intrigue are amply distributed over the first three acts. The play itself concerns the ultimate intrigue of the time, the planning around getting Henry VIII a divorce from his first wife, in contravention of the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. These plannings, on which hung the affairs of states and nations, were stage managed by Cardinal Wolsey, and compliantly followed by many of the King's courtiers. All were greedy for the benefits that would accrue from Henry's acquisition of this divorce.