

“Falstaff Sweats to Death and Lards the Lean Earth:”
Smearing “Butter” in Early Modern England

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My paper explores the metaphor of “melting butter” as the epithet repeatedly given to the perspiring body of Sir John Falstaff, one of the most comical characters invented by William Shakespeare. The tropes comparing Falstaff to oily and fusible stuffs such as butter, grease, or wax are noteworthy as its number totals more than ten times throughout *Part 1 and 2 of Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Taken up in a number of studies, the series of figurative expressions that exaggerates Falstaff’s corpulent and sweating body is often considered to embody his embarrassment when his bombast is discovered and subjected to relentless ridicules. They can be contextualized in the use of “butter” in the conventional sayings in early modern English. For instance, the idiomatic phrases such as “to melt like butter before the sun” or “a letter (/promise) sealed with butter” often suggested the male figures who fail to perform their manhood properly. The imagery of “melting butter” representing the unfulfilled masculinity also agrees with the contemporary physiology which equated the excessive evacuation of body fluids with the person’s loss of self-command over his/her body. It is identified as the sign of deep disgrace especially when the occasion is public.

Based on the discussion above, I will focus on the several moments when we hear Falstaff calling attention to his body in the name of “melting butter” (four times), which hints that the unique expression may not merely stand for his humiliated state. Starting from Prince Hal’s account that “Falstaff sweats to death / And lards the lean earth as he walks along” (II.ii.105-06 *Henry IV*), I would like to demonstrate how Falstaff develops the abusive language jeering at his hidrosis to the proof that he successfully plays the expected role of laughing stock.