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Dr. Fike

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Self-Analytical Cover letter

During this semester-long writing process, my writing skills and critical thinking skills have developed in a way I never knew was possible before this assignment. I am majoring in Biomedical Research and had never read Shakespeare before taking this class. When I was approached with the topic of writing about a research paper on Falstaff and obesity, I was thrilled and nervous. Writing research papers is naturally in my wheelhouse as a woman in biology, however combining the biological condition of obesity with a Shakespeare character proved to be difficult.

One of the challenges I had when writing this paper was combining historical literature and biology, a task I had never done before. I had written many papers on topics that were not based on biology. Seeing symbolism in art and literature is something that comes very naturally to me. Writing about Falstaff's symbolism in *1 Henry IV* was an easy task. Understanding and putting into words how his obesity

symbolically destroys the relationship he has with Hal was simple, but adding the biology was the difficult part. Broadening my horizons as a writer was necessary in order to combine two polar opposite subjects.

The writing process itself was different from the writing process I used in the past. The outline portion of the paper was something I had not done in the past but after using the outline and then elaborating on my own words, it proved to be detrimental in my paper development. Due to the coronavirus quarantine, I was not able to use resources as effectively as I could have, had I been able to meet face to face. I know that in the future, after I turn this paper in for good, I will seek improvement on the paper in hopes of strengthening my combining skills of two very different subjects. I also hope to publish this paper after improving it using the writing center, Dr. Fike, and other resources. I know my final draft is far from perfect but I am eager to improve it past the due date to achieve a personal goal.

While writing this paper and taking the Shakespeare class, I have learned a lot about Shakespeare's plays and the actual history of when he lived. As I stated before, I had never read a Shakespeare play. I took this class because I had always wanted

to know more about Shakespeare and what life was like back then,
and because I was approached with an enticing opportunity that I
am proud to have taken.

ABSTRACT

Title: Shakespeare's Fat Rogue: Falstaff and Obesity

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The essay uses biological analysis to determine how John Falstaff's obesity in William Shakespeare's great tetralogy *The Henriad* illuminates his relationship with Prince Hal. Previous criticism from Joshua Fisher, Elena Levy-Navarro, Philip Williams, and others suggests that obesity signifies psychological imbalance within Falstaff and that it ominously prefigures one possible future for Prince Hal. The present study argues that the biological drivers of Falstaff's obesity and resulting death shadow the apparently friendly and fatherly relationship he has with the prodigal prince. For example, obesity can have long-lasting effects on the psyche due to the strain it puts on the body. The infectious personality that Falstaff possesses, combined with obesity slowly destroying his body and brain, makes for a toxic character audiences first fall for, grow to loathe, and finally pity. In Shakespeare's re-visioning of Jesus's parable, the father figure tempts the

son figure onto the broad highway that leads to destruction. Falstaff's obesity not only manifests a repugnant soul that revels in gluttony and other vices but also signifies the antithesis of the glory that awaits Hal as King Henry V.

Shakespeare's Fat Rogue: Falstaff and Obesity

John Falstaff who appears in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *1 Henry IV*, and *2 Henry IV*, is morbidly obese and quite unsavory. Throughout *1 Henry IV* he eats and drinks to excess, acts cowardly, and practically lives in the taverns with the lower class. Falstaff and Prince Hal share an unlikely father-son relationship whose symbolic meaning is greatly enhanced by Falstaff's obese body and eventual death. Shakespeare includes symbolism such as patricide, a battle between the id and superego, and a zero-sum or parasitic relationship in which one gains and the other loses. The biological reasons behind Falstaff's obesity and death add symbolic and contextual meaning to the play via the friendly and fatherly relationship he has with the prodigal Prince Hal.

Previous criticism of Falstaff and his symbolic meaning enhances my argument that his body and death served as an underlying tone in the play that the relationship he has with Prince Hal is toxic for both parties. Authors suggest that Falstaff's gluttonous habits affect his relationship with Hal. Shakespeare critic Joshua Fisher states,

Shifting the emphasis from the quantity to the quality of foodstuffs, Falstaff can be understood as embodying a more

expansive metaphorical significance as food and as overwhelmingly native English foodstuffs that both appeal to and threaten to upset Hal's humoral balance and his capacity to govern both self and nation (4).

Falstaff consumes endless amounts of sack (wine), bread (high in carbohydrates), anchovies (high in fat), and other English food items. Fisher focuses on quality of food rather than the quantity of food that Falstaff consumes. Quality of food is just as important, if not more important, than the quantity of which one eats. Food has the power to build a body and in Falstaff's case he builds a body to be obese with fat reserves. Shakespeare gives rise to the symbolism of Falstaff's obesity being the root of the imbalance and conflict between Prince Hal and his own father, King Henry. Obesity itself can cause an immense amount of imbalance and conflict inside the body, resulting in the body having a constantly unnatural state, thus disturbing homeostasis, especially due to the quality of food.

Just like Falstaff's body, the relationship with Prince Hal lives in a disrupted state. Elena Levy-Navarro studies body image in Shakespeare's time. She suggests,

Falstaff is the emblem of the decadent luxury of civilization. He is also understood as that which threatens

to obstruct the progress of the state. What is needed is the type of reform that the gaunt Hal embodies which promises to rescue the nation from the sins of its own excess. (8-9)

By stooping down to Falstaff's level, Prince Hal learns the way of life of the lower class. He uses this tactic to understand what his nation truly needs and the type of reform necessary for success. Levy-Navarro's reflection on the symbolism of the relationship allows the audience to have a visual of a parasite in which the more Falstaff takes from Hal to pack on to his own body and add to his obesity, the more Hal realizes that he must overcome the parasite in order to become a King his own Father would be proud of.

During a son's developmental journey into a man, self-induced separation from his father is a common attempt to be his own man. The self-induced separation Hal has from the king plays a key role in the relationship between Falstaff and Hal. Critic Philip Williams suggests that some form of separation from the father is necessary for a son's independence. Hal rejects and is rejected by his true father, serving as a form of patricide to the psyche. He forms a deep bond with Falstaff, satisfying his need for a father-figure, but

again commits patricide when he publically rejects Falstaff, thus gaining his independence. While Prince Hal was a friend to Falstaff, Hal realizes that Falstaff served as a heavy burden to him, no matter the dynamic of the relationship; yet more symbolism to the actual imbalance of the relationship embodied by Falstaff's obesity.

Prince Hal is a smart, cunning character despite his youth. Almost as if he can see into the future, he knows that he will reject Falstaff because he could quite literally symbolize what the prince will become if he stays in the tavern. Jeffery Wilson states that "virtue is lean, vice heavy, and Falstaff is the fat man skinny Hal will become, physically and morally, if the prince remains at the Tavern" (1). Perhaps the reason for Hal's patricide of Falstaff is due to the fact that Hal becomes fearful of his own future if he continues to let Falstaff weigh him down. Another possibility could be because after Hal spends his time in the taverns, he sees the type of virtue the kingdom needs and does not want to take after Falstaff and his unvirtuous lifestyle. Barbara Everett suggests that Falstaff is the "antiembodiement" of the ideal Protestant (548). Since Hal will rise to the throne in a short amount of time, he must be a

Protestant role model for his subjects, rejecting gluttony and living in moderation.

There is a lot of evidence in the play that Shakespeare purposely created Falstaff to be obese. Prince Hal insults him in the tavern saying, "Thou art so fat-witted, with drinking of old sack and unbuttoning thee after supper and sleeping upon benches after noon..." (2.1.2-4). The well-known scene where Falstaff and Hal take turns imitating the king, Prince Hal insults Falstaff yet again by saying,

Why dost thou converse with that trunk of humors, that bolting-hutch of beastliness, that swollen parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloak-bag of guts, that roasted Manningtree ox with pudding in his belly... (2.4.443-48)

A brief description of what a bolting-hutch is described as "a hutch (= barrel) used for bolting (= sieving) flour. So Falstaff is a big fat barrel into which all beastly qualities are sieved" (Bradford). Breaking down the line further, he is called a suitcase full of organs, a fat cow filled with dessert, and a swollen sack of disease. Peto reads Falstaff's bar tab aloud to Prince Hal after Falstaff passes out in the tavern, reinforcing that he is a quite unsavory excuse for a role model, and

frankly, a man. Peto says, "Item, A capon, 2s. 2d. Item, Sauce, 4d. Item, Sack, two gallons, 5s. 8d. Item, Anchovies and sack after supper, 2s.6d. Item, Bread, ob" (2.4.529-34). Once again, Shakespeare does not hesitate to show the audience that he purposefully wrote Falstaff to be an obese man for the endless amount of symbolism that obesity can provide for the imbalanced relationship shared between Falstaff and Prince Hal.

There are many reasons one can become obese, and in order to fully understand Falstaff's condition, one must understand the biological process. A study done by Wang and colleagues in 2008 explains that obese individuals have higher levels of a hormone called leptin, which is a signaling molecule to tell the brain that the stomach is full. They also have high blood sugar, which results in high concentrations of insulin, the enzyme that allows sugar to flow into our cells. With leptin and insulin both being overworked, the body loses sensitivity to them, and it begins to reverse metabolize and pack on weight instead of shed it (437). While Shakespeare had no understanding of the biology of the condition, he may have understood the stubbornness of body "fat," and how hard it is to get rid of it, especially after imbalance has permanently set in. Much like how hard it is to shake a toxic, stubborn relationship after

imbalance has permanently set in. Shakespeare also appears to be somewhat of a psychologist, because of many of his characters he wrote into his other plays, such as Hamlet and his "melancholy." Due to the clues that Shakespeare understood psychology, he may have understood that overeating is a common sign of depression, along with individuals' need for heightened stimulation to feel pleasure, or in other words to feel "alive." Prince Hal describes Falstaff's lifestyle as follows:

Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and
clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of
leaping-houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot
wench in flame-colored taffeta, I see no reason why thou
shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day.

(1.2.6-12)

Falstaff lives a life of thrilling sin, eating and drinking to gluttonous excess, living with sloth, and ogling lustfully at any woman who can breathe. Falstaff lives this way because he craves a sense of adrenalin, a heightened sense of stimulation just to feel human, and he overeats to be in control over something in his life besides his dead emotion. He cannot control his emotions, his social class, or his addictions, but he can control what he introduces into his body, and he gains a

sense of security knowing that he is finally in charge.

Depression, paired with biological insensitivity to neurotransmitters due to obesity, can create an extremely unhealthy lifestyle, and even eventually result in death from heart failure.

Chronic overeating can lead to health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol, and risk of stroke or heart attack. However, Falstaff's fake death and real death have deep symbolism that enhances the toxicity of his relationship with Hal. When in battle, Falstaff fakes a heart attack when he is about to be killed by Douglas. Not only does this show the audience his cowardice, it shows that Falstaff might be aware that he will one day die due to a heart attack brought on by his obesity, so he presents his death as a heart attack to make it seem believable to those around him. Everyone in battle of course believe that Falstaff is dead because he is an old, obese man who overexerted himself. On the day of Falstaff's real death, the Hostess says that he went cold from the feet up (2.3.22-25). Biologically, the coldness of his extremities suggest that Falstaff suffered from poor circulation, evidence that he was so obese that his arteries were likely clogged, his heart weak, and he died from a heart attack. However, the

symbolism of his death relates directly to an actual historical account that provides even deeper meaning to his character. Socrates's death was described the exact same way when he was put on trial and forced to drink hemlock for misleading the youth. Upon Socrates's death, he went cold from the feet up. Falstaff and Socrates also have eerie similarities in which they were both considered to be misleaders of the vulnerable. In *1 Henry IV* Hal refers to him as "That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan" (2.4.457-58).

Another clue suggests the likelihood that Falstaff died of a heart attack. At his death, he cries out "God, God, God!" implying that he is in great pain, a common symptom of a heart attack. However, symbolism once again speaks to the audience because he is dying with the weight of his sins crushing his chest, his heart, and his soul. Sins such as misleading youth, stealing, gluttony, lustfulness, lying, and many more. The sins he commits manifests themselves as weight on his belly, biologically and symbolically, because of his unhealthy and sinful lifestyle.

In *2 Henry V*, Falstaff's death symbolises how a parasite cannot live without a host. When Prince Hal, turned King Henry

V, rejects Falstaff, and Falstaff no longer has anyone to bring down to his low level, he is rendered useless and dies, just as a parasite without a host will die. His obesity represents the toxicity between Falstaff and Prince Hal, while at the same time being toxic to Falstaff himself, thus killing him. Though Falstaff is a well-loved character in Shakespeare, he is a toxic person to have a relationship with because he drags even royalty down to the lowest of levels. While Prince Hal learns valuable lessons from Falstaff, the most important lesson the prince learns is that he is better off without the extra weight.

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