

Henry IV Part I

W.Shakespeare

October 2, 2016

The historical plays by Shakespeare are somewhat overrated although not entirely devoid of charm, In this one we are, I believe for the first time introduced to Falstaff, although not yet by that name. The story is well-known, the usurper Henry who had opposed his cousin Richard II having him deposed and subsequently disposed of, is in his turn challenged by the champions of another cousin having formally a stronger claim on the throne. Forces are assembled but the rebels do not manage to get their act together in time. The leading proponent is Hotspur a young hot-tempered warrior who has already shown his valor in the service of the King but now having fallen out with him, is eager to strike anyway. The King Henry suggests a truce as they two armies have camped opposite each other, but the messenger intended to relay that offer decides not to do so and the dice is thrown. It is indeed impossible to display a battle on a stage in any realistic way and Shakespeare is reduced to present some personal encounters, one of which leads to the death of Hotspur by the hand of Prince Hal, in spite of some serious wound (an arrow in the face actually according to historical records). This turns out to be a somewhat surprising turn of events, as the king had earlier on expressed regret that his own son was not of the same calibre as that of his rival. His son who initially is presented as a good for nothing not above playing childish pranks on his companions, of which the future Falstaff stands out by his buffoonery, now comes into his own. Now the Falstaff character provides so called comic relief by the contrast between his bragger and his acts, a source of entertainment Shakespeare was not able to resist making him a recurrent fixture. As usual it is hardly the plot that matters but delivery, and as usual there is a great variety from short rejoinders to lengthy soliloquies. One may be excused at times when ones mind wanders as one plows through some of them.

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