

Henry IV Part II

W.Shakespeare

October 7-9, 2016

Shakespeare is not true to the historical facts. But why should he be? The second part of Henry IV follows more or less on the heels of the first part, and it ends with the death of the king, although in reality there was quite some time between crushing the rebellion and dying in misery stricken by some degeneration of the brain. But this would be hard and pointless to depict on stage.

Falstaff is coming on his own, a character who made the crowds come as well. Had he, the playwright, been more attuned to the appeal to the general public, Falstaff would have been a permanently recurring character, maybe playing the head role in a couple of plays. Instead Shakespeare seems to have tired of him after three appearances. Much of his comic routine is built on misunderstandings, jumping to conclusions. When one character speaks about 'waste' Falstaff refers to 'waist', later on 'qualm' is interpreted as 'calm'. The effect is farcical and intended to be so. He plays the lead of a subplot involving the mistress Quickly, whom he owes money, and the tart Tearsheet with whom he carouses. Some magistrates are sent to settle matters and arrest him, and he would not be Falstaff had he not been able to wrangle himself out of it. The second attempt at a rebellion follows suit on the first attempts which ended in disaster and the death of Hotspur the impetuous son of the leader (the fact that the battle is lost is initially lost on the rebels, who soon are rectified in their illusion), but this time the rebels are not crushed in battle but are made victims to a ruse. The real drama is at the end, the king being sick and sunk into deep sleep, his son Hal mistakenly believes that he is dead and makes off with the crown. But the old king momentarily revives and is aghast at what he perceives as the greed of his son. There comes a confrontation which ends eventually in a reconciliation, the young son finally being able to convince his father of his unflagging devotion. Shortly thereafter the king really dies and Hal ascends as Henry V, making up the last part of the tetralogy that began with Richard II. We see Falstaff at his last trying to get back into the good graces of his erstwhile companion but is rebuffed. Shortly thereafter Falstaff dies, as we learn from the sequel.

Plot accounts (and amounts) to little in the plays of Shakespeare, needed more as coat hangers on which to attach the flowering garb. So let us make some remarks.

In the second act scene one, mistress Quickly of the tavern complains of Falstaff *He has eaten me out of house and home*'. Remarkable because the saying is extinct in contemporary English, but still alive in Swedish *äta mig ur huset*. The tart Doll Tearsheet is referred to as some road by prince Hal, and his low companion Poins, part of the entourage of Falstaff, concurs *I warrant you, as common as the way between Saint Albans and London*. In other words many men have traveled it. The interchange being representative of the bawdiness that is inevitable in the more popular and low-minded of his plays. One may be reminded of Dutch genre paintings by a Jan Steen, to get a feel. The widow of Hotspur accuses her father-in-law of having abandoned his son. After all the forces which turned

against the king were greatly reduced due to his inability to arrive on the scene *O mircale of men! him did you leave,/Second to none, unseconded by you,/To look upon the hideous god of war/In disadvantage, to abide a field/Where nothing but the sound of Hotspur's name/Did seem defensible; so you left him..* In the third act, the King is worried about the strength of the rebels and refer to an army of fifty thousand strong. His supporter the Earl of Warwick wants to calm him. *It cannot be, my lord/Rumor doth double, like the voice and echo,/The numbers of the feared. Please it your grace to go to bed? Upon my soul, my lord,The powers that you already have set forth/Shall bring this prize in very easily.* Or when Falstaff encounter Shadow (of Shallow and Shadow) while recruiting men for his mission against the rebels. *Shadow, whose son art thou?* and Shadow respectfully retorts *My mother's son, sir ,* with Falstaff rejoicing *Thy mother's son! Like enough, and thy father's shadow. So the son of the female is the shadow of the male - it is often so indeed - but not of the father's substance.* In the fourth act the rebels , with Mowbray at the head, close up in the forest. A messenger informs them *West of this forest, scarcely off a mile,/ In goody form comes on the enemy;/ And, by the ground they hide, I judge their number/ Upon or near the rate of thirty thousand*¹. Later Westmoreland tries (successfully as it will turn out) to ween the rebels away from their cause. *Mowbray, you overween to take it so./This offer comes from mercy, not from fear:/ For lo, within a ken our army lies,/ Upon mine honour,all too confident/To give admittance to a thought of fear.* The rebels decide to take on the offer, they think of the king and his power in terms of *So that his power, like to a fangless lion,/ May offer, but not hold..* The Archbishop of York, another rebel, adds confidently *If we do make our atonement well,/ Our peace will, like a broken limb united,/ Grow stronger for the breaking..* A younger son of the King - Prince John - enters on the scene, and upbraids the Bishop for taking part in this military adventure *My lord of York, it better showed with you/ When that your flock, assembled by the bell,/ Encircled you to hear with reverence/ Your exposition of the holy text,/ Then now to see you here an iron man,/ Cheering a route of rebels with your drum,/ Turning the word to sword, and life to death.* And continues to remind him that he had sat close to the heart of his monarch ripening under his sunshine, and how he now abuses such trust, this man once so deep within the book of God. Later on there is an exchange between Falstaff and his namesake Prince John, where Falstaff rejoices at his deeds on the battlefield and refers to Caesar. *..He saw me and yielded, that may justly say, with the hook-nosed fellow of Rome, 'I came, saw, and overcame'.* The prince adds sarcastically *It was more of his courtesy than your deserving.* Later on Falstaff has a long soliloquy, mostly about drinking sack (sherry) and at the end referring to prince Hal. *...Hereof comes it that Prince Harry is valiant; for the cold blood he did naturally inherit of his father he hath, like lean, sterile, and bare land, manured, husbanded, and tilled, with excellent endeavour of drinking good, and good store of fertile sherry, that he is become very hot and valiant. .* In the third scene of the fourth act the King is asking for his son, prince Hal, and told that he is lost in the company of Poine et all, he laments *Most subject is the fattest soil to weeds,/ And he, the noble image of my youth,/ Is overspread with them; therefore my grief/ Stretches itself beyond the hour of death.* And indeed he is soon to die. Later on when the king wakes up from his sleep and asks about the crown, and who took it from his pillow, being

¹ The same amount of men, who at the moment I write this is converging on Mosul

given no answer, he adds two and two and exhorts *The Prince has ta'en it hence. Go seek him out./ is he so hasty that he doth suppose/ My sleep, my death?/ Find him, my lord of Warwick; chide him hither.* He complains that this aggravates his disease observing *How quickly nature falls into revolt/ When gold becomes her object.* . Later on he tells his son, brought up to him, that *Thou hast stol'n that which after some few hours/ Where thine without offence, and at my death/Thou hast sealed up my expectation. Thy life did manifest thou loved'st me not,/ And thou wilt have me die assured of it..* The son is led to implore *If any rebel or vain spirit of mine/ Did with the least affection of a welcome/ Give entertainment to the mght of it,/ Let God for ever keep it from my head,/ And make me as the poorest vassal is,/ That doth with awe and terror kneel to it..* Reconciliation follows. There is another act left over, in which to clean things up.

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