

Henry V

SYNOPSIS

The Life of Henry the Fifth

The different acts of the play are introduced by a chorus. When Henry V becomes king, he is considering a tax on Church property, so the Archbishop of Canterbury distracts him from this project by reminding him of his claim to the throne of France. When the Dauphin, the heir to the French throne, replies to this claim by sending him a present of tennis balls — a reference to his youth and previous lifestyle — Henry decides to invade France.

Some of Henry's old friends from Eastcheap are thinking of joining the army, and hear about the death of Falstaff from Mistress Quickly.

Before setting sail, Henry deals ruthlessly with a plot against him, executing the leaders.

The French King rejects Henry's claim, and Henry attacks the northern French town of Harfleur. After a long siege, in which differences between the English, Welsh, Scots and Irish are illustrated, the town surrenders.

The French Princess Katherine decides to learn English, but the Dauphin and the French nobles decide on revenge. The English army is weakened by sickness and retreats towards Calais in constant rain, but the French cut them off. During the retreat Henry has one of his old friends hanged for stealing.

A French herald offers to ransom Henry, allowing him to go free in exchange for payment, but he rejects the offer. Near the village of Agincourt the two armies prepare for battle. The French are confident of victory and spend the night celebrating, while the English prepare quietly. During the night the King tours the camp in disguise, to hear the opinions of the ordinary soldiers. He is challenged by some to consider the heavy responsibilities of being a king and having so many lives in his hands.

Before the battle begins the offer of ransom is repeated, but Henry makes a stirring speech emphasizing how proud they will be to be part of this small 'band of brothers' and how they will always be remembered. Unexpectedly, the English win a great victory, with remarkably small losses, although during the battle two crimes are committed: the killing of the boys looking after the English baggage, and the killing of French prisoners in retaliation.

As a result of the battle there is an agreement with the French King, part of which is that Henry should marry Katherine. In spite of his poor French, he manages to win her over. Their child will rule both England and France, disinheriting the French Dauphin.

Finally the chorus points out that all the gains from this war will be lost soon afterwards.

Media:

DVD:

Henry V (1944), dir. Laurence Olivier

An Age of Kings (BBC TV 1960), dir. Michael Hayes (a fusion of all the history plays from *Richard II* to *Richard III*)

Henry V (BBC TV Shakespeare 1979), dir. David Giles

Henry V (1989), dir. Kenneth Branagh

Henry V (BBC TV 2012), dir. Thea Sharrock (part of mini-series *The Hollow Crown*)

Not commercially available:

Henry V at the Globe (TV 1997), dir. Richard Olivier

CD Audio:

Henry V (Naxos)

Henry V (Arkangel Complete Shakespeare)

[Michael Mitchell]