

Henry V

The Whole Story (unabridged synopsis)

A Chorus enters “O for a muse of fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention” and asks the audience to use its imagination while the actors try to portray great kings and battles within the confines of “This wooden O.”

The Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely discuss how there is a proposed bill that would strip the Church of most of its property. They then praise King Henry V, who has abandoned the wildness of his youth and is a friend to the Church. The Archbishop says that he will offer a great sum of money and support for Henry’s campaign against France to convince him to oppose the bill.

Henry charges the Archbishop to advise him if he has a rightful claim to France and to consider the import of his advice. The Archbishop gives a long-winded and complicated explanation of how the genealogy of the monarchs of France should have had the French crown passing to England. “*In terram Salicam mulieres ne succedant*, ‘No woman shall succeed in Salic land:’” Henry’s advisors also tell him that they expect that he will rightfully move against France. Henry asks if he must also prepare to fight the Scots. He is advised to leave sufficient forces at home to guard his country, but to still send enough to invade France. Henry resolves to attack France and he sends for the French ambassador. The ambassador tells him the Dauphin (the French heir to the throne) replies to his claim to certain French lands by sending him a “gift” of tennis balls. Henry says “I will keep my state, be like a King and show my sail of greatness when I do rouse me in my throne of France.”

Chorus now tells us how all of England is riled up about the chance to attack France. In a London street, two of Sir John Falstaff’s old cronies, Bardolph and Pistol are fighting. Pistol has married Mistress Quickly. Nym tries to separate them both. A boy enters with word that Falstaff is dying and Mistress Quickly says, “The King has killed his heart.”

Exeter, Bedford and Westmoreland relate that the King has found out traitors. Richard, Earl of Cambridge, Henry, Lord Scroop and Sir Thomas Gray arrive with the King, who asks about his

chances against the French. They all praise him to the skies. Henry has decided to release a prisoner who was arrested for drunkenly criticizing him in public. The 3 men (the traitors) advise him to punish the man. He hands the three men orders, which are actually evidence of their treason. Despite their pleading he says, “The mercy that was quick in us but late, by your own counsel is suppressed and killed.” The traitors are arrested and Henry sails for France.

As Nym, Bardolph and Pistol prepare to leave and fight in France, Mistress Quickly tells them of Falstaff’s death. “He’s not in Hell: He’s in Arthur’s bosom, if ever man went to Arthur’s bosom.”

The King of France tells his advisors that they must prepare to fight the English, and the Dauphin says they should ignore Henry’s threats because he is a “vain, giddy, shallow, humorous youth.” The Duke of Exeter, ambassador from Henry enters and demands that the French give Henry the crown or the English will invade. The King says he will consider it but the Dauphin says that no matter what his father decides he “desires nothing but odds with England.”

Chorus tells us that the French King offers Henry his daughter and “some petty and unprofitable dukedoms.”

Before the gates of Harfleur, a town in France, Henry gives a rousing speech to his troops, “Once more into the breach dear friends, once more!” Many of his soldiers are solid fighting men, but Bardolph, Nym and Pistol hesitate to charge and are driven forward by the Welsh captain Fluellen. Their boy relates how he is ashamed to serve with them. Fluellen, the Irish Captain Macmorris and Captain Jamy the Scot all argue over the appropriate way to conduct the battle. As they argue they hear that the town has asked for a parley.

Henry delivers a threatening speech to the Governor of Harfleur, telling him that he will not be able to control his soldiers from raping their women and killing all the elderly men and young children. This half-bluff, half-truth convinces the Governor to surrender and the gates are opened.

Katherine, the daughter the French King has an English lesson with her lady-in-waiting before dinner. She is scandalized that the English words for foot and gown sound like French curses.

The French King discusses how to respond to Henry's so far successful invasion and he orders that Mountjoy, his herald, be sent to Henry to relay defiance and warn that a French army will now come against the English forces.

In the aftermath of the taking of Harfleur, Pistol is trying to get Bardolph pardoned for stealing from a French church. Bardolph is going to be hung, because, as Henry says, "When lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner"

Mountjoy arrives and delivers his message. Henry will not give himself up and tells the King's messenger "My ransom is this frail and worthless trunk, My army but a weak and sickly guard. Yet, God before me, tell him we will come on."

It is night now and the French leaders spend time praising themselves and yearning for morning, when they can attack the English.

Chorus sets the scene in the English camp thus, "Now entertain conjecture of a time when creeping murmur and the pouring dark fills the wide vessel of the Universe." It is dark, cold and raining, and the two armies are not so far apart that they cannot hear each other's horses and see each other's fires. The English are sick, underfed and exhausted. The French are supplied with food, fresh horses and plate armor.

Henry walks thru his camp, outside Agincourt, hiding his identity in a cloak. He goes from tent to tent to cheer everyone and give them "a little touch of Harry in the night."

He speaks with three soldiers and sits with them still disguised. He listens while they discuss their probable deaths tomorrow. They feel that the King will have much reckoning to do if they are lead unjustly to their deaths. Henry argues that "Every subject's duty is the King's: but every subject's soul is his own." Later, Henry, unable to sleep, ruminates on the responsibility of a King. He asks, "Not today, oh Lord, O not today

think not upon the fault my father made in compassing the crown."

The next day dawns and Westmoreland wishes that they had more men to fight against the French. Henry says, "If we are marked to die, we are enough To do our country loss, and if to live, The few men, the greater share of honour." It is the feast day of St. Crispin and in future years every old man in England will wish he had been at the battle to brag on the great victory. After his rousing words, Westmoreland says, "Would you and I alone, with out more help, could fight this battle!" Montjoy, the French herald, enters, and asks again if Henry will ransom himself and prevent his armies certain defeat. Henry will not and the battle begins.

During the battle, Pistol and the Boy meet a French gentleman who offers them money to let him escape. The boy comments on Pistol's cowardice and mentions that there are too few soldiers to guard the camp but the young boys who travel with the army.

Fluellen enters and tells the hideous news that all the young boys in the camp have been slaughtered by the retreating French. This is strictly against all rules of war. Mountjoy arrives and asks permission for the French to carry off their dead. The victory goes to the English, and Henry considers it the grace and favor of God that more English noblemen and soldiers are not dead.

Pistol relates that his wife Mistress Quickly is dead and resolves to return to England and continue his life of crime.

Back in France, Henry is coming to terms with his new nation. While the King of France considers his options, his daughter Katherine and Henry court and Henry proposed marriage to the lady, saying, "England is thine, Ireland is thine, France is thine, and Henry Plantagenet is thine!"

Katherine consents to marry Henry and the King returns, agreeing to Henry's demands.

Chorus enters and tells us

"Small time, but in that small most greatly lived
This Star of England. "