

CLASSIC FILM SERIES, FILM #1: HENRY V

Original script by William Shakespeare  
Produced and directed by Laurence Olivier  
Starring Laurence Olivier as Henry V of England  
With Renee Asherson as Princess Katherine of France  
Music by William Walton

THE ORIGINAL PLAY: Shakespeare's Henry V, first performed in 1599, is the conclusion of a tetralogy (series of four plays) on English history. In Richard II, Henry Bolingbroke deposes the title character (1399) and becomes King Henry IV. In Henry IV, Part I--generally considered the best play of the series--the new king is plagued by the rebellion of his subjects and the misbehavior of his son, Prince Hal, who comes to his senses just in time to show courage in battle. In Henry IV, Part II, Hal learns the importance of order and justice and, now that he is properly educated in virtue, becomes King Henry V upon the death of his father. In Henry V the new king invades France to regain lost territory, wins a brilliant victory at Agincourt (1415), and woos the French Princess Katherine. The play marks a high point for the English. Soon after Henry V's reign they experience defeat in France and civil war at home.

THE FILM: Filmed in England and Ireland--rather than France--during World War II and released in 1945, Henry V is the first of the three great Shakespearean films to be acted, directed, and produced by Laurence Olivier; Hamlet followed in 1948 and Richard III in 1955. (Olivier also played the title role in the 1965 screen version of Othello.) Olivier begins with a striking innovation: he presents the first act of Henry V as it might have appeared at its first performance at the Globe in London. The viewer, then, has a rare opportunity to observe Elizabethan theatre. For the last four acts the camera sails to France with King Henry and transcends the limitations of the stage with beautiful landscapes and spectacular battle scenes "rich as the finest medieval tapestry" (Life, 20 May 1946, p. 39). Daniel Schwarz remarks that the film's visual effects do not detract from Shakespeare's poetry but rather enhance it ("The Present and Future of Shakespeare," New York Times Magazine, 12 May 1946, p. 56). Although Olivier cuts one-third of the original lines, he shows sensitivity to the language of the play by reversing the usual practice and pulling the camera back--rather than doing a close-up shot--when a scene climaxes and the language is most elevated. Olivier believes that "it isn't necessary in Shakespeare for the camera to create the climax. The verse does that" (quoted by Schwarz, p. 22). Roger Manvell, an expert on Shakespearean films, observes that this innovative camera technique in Henry V has set the norm for the artistic filming of Shakespeare (Shakespeare Summer School, Stratford-upon-Avon, 14 Aug. 1979).

THE PATRIOTIC THEME: This is the great patriotic play that the British pull out when they want to wave the flag. Olivier selected it during the Blitzkrieg of World War II, and the Royal Shakespeare Company presented it for the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. In Henry V the no-good prince of the earlier plays has matured, as Shakespeare puts it, into "the mirror of all Christian kings" and leads England to vanquish her foes. (Shakespeare follows his overly patriotic sources in attributing ten thousand casualties to the French and only twenty-nine to the English.) Olivier accents the nationalistic element. Phillip T. Hartung notes, for example, that the scenes at the French court make the French look much worse than Shakespeare could have intended ("Breathes There a Man," Commonweal, 21 June 1946, p. 239). Many recent critics question this black-and-white interpretation of the opposing sides in the play. Henry, like the rest of Shakespeare's heroes, claims Brian Morris, does not look so completely heroic under scrutiny; he treats prisoners cruelly and behaves like Machiavelli's ideal prince (Shakespeare Summer School, Stratford-upon-Avon, 10 July 1979).

THE CRITICAL EVALUATION: Most critics responded to Olivier's Henry V with superlatives, calling it "the finest movie I have ever seen" (John Mason Brown, "The Old Vic and 'Henry V,'" Saturday Review, 25 May 1946, p. 26) and "one of the great experiences in the history of motion pictures" (Time, 8 April 1946, p. 58). Time put Olivier on its front cover for his achievement, and almost everyone agreed that it was the finest Shakespearean film that had been made. Variety, however, doubted that even Olivier's Shakespeare would capture America: "Boy, can you imagine this in Chillycothe?" (quoted in Schwarz, p. 22). No. But Bolivar--thirty-three years later--is another case.