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Agincourt Carol

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Agincourt Carol

The best known of all English carols (also called the Agincourt Song), this composition celebrates the victory of Henry V at Agincourt in 1415 and was probably written shortly thereafter. It survives in two of the most important collections of 15th-century carols, the Trinity Roll (Cambridge, Trinity College 0.3.58) and the Egerton Manuscript (BL Egerton 3307). Reference is made to the siege of Harfleur, success on the field at Agincourt, and the return to London in triumph with hostages. As is often the case, this carol mixes two languages. The burden, or framing refrain, is in Latin ("Deo gratias Anglia, redde pro victoria"), and the five strophes of verse are in English ("Owre Kynge went forth to Normandy," etc.). Also as in a number of other carols, there are in fact two settings of the burden. These are presumably to be sung together, one after the other, in alternation with the verses. The first begins in unison and expands to two voices while the second is for three voices throughout. The verse is for two voices, with a memorable tune in the lower part. This tune has been retexted and reharmonized for congregational singing in some modern Protestant hymnals, where it is identified as "Deo gratias."

Peter M. Lefferts

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