

Hail and Reign

SYNOPSIS

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ACT ONE

As the Chronicler introduces the play, it is 1135, in England. King Henry I has died, with only a daughter to succeed him on the throne, and the reluctant promises of his noblemen to recognize her as Queen. The daughter, living in France and going by the title Empress Matilda, is informed of her father's death and sets off swiftly for England, leaving her beloved son, Henry, behind, in the care of her estranged husband.

But being a woman, and a haughty one at that, who has lived most of her life abroad, Empress Matilda is unpopular in England. She's also no friend of the Church. The powerful Bishop of Winchester sets in motion a plot to deny her the throne by persuading the well-meaning nobleman Stephen to usurp it instead, and a coronation is staged.

Landing on the shores of England, Matilda declares war. The country descends into chaos as barons take up opposing sides. England's newest King is also her kindest: he and his wife, Matty, adopt Will, the abandoned son of an opposing warlord.

Stephen learns that Matilda's forces have besieged the city of Lincoln. Moved by the pleas of his countrymen, he decides to leave at once for the battlefield, where he is captured. Stephen's forces are defeated and Matilda takes London. The Bishop of Winchester deserts to the side of the Empress. Matty fears that all hope is lost, but she is persuaded by the Chronicler, Will, and Stephen's partisans to push aside her fears and take up her husband's cause.

ACT TWO

The newly crowned Queen Matilda, seething with resentment, rules with an iron fist and little joy. She has found that a crown means little when the heart is wounded; to her dismay, her son Henry has remained behind in France, conquering castles with his father.

Matty, leading the rebel forces, displays a natural gift for battlefield strategy, although she's only fighting this war to have her husband back with her. As Matty's forces advance, Matilda becomes unhinged and takes out her wrath on humble townsfolk and allies alike. When a mob of Londoners marches upon the royal palace demanding her overthrow, Matilda flees London, abandoned by nearly everyone except for her most loyal soldier, Robert of Gloucester.

Matty's troops enter London, but England is still without a King, since Matilda continues to hold Stephen captive far from the city. Matty's forces manage to capture Robert of Gloucester, and Matilda agrees to release Stephen in exchange for him. England returns to the rule of King Stephen. Her dreams shattered, Matilda seems resigned to return to France, to the husband and son who never loved her. But just as our play closes she abruptly decides to fight on, unable to accept the hopelessness of her cause.

Kind-hearted Will is sad to see the story end here, for the Empress Matilda has lost everything. Not everything, the Chronicler confides, revealing to Will what will happen in the future: a peace treaty recognizing Stephen as rightful king until his dying day, at which time Matilda's son will inherit the throne and become King Henry II. Matilda, for all her flaws, faced down the thunder of history for the sake of the son she loved