



the last wife

By Kate Hennig
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Centaur Theatre
Study Guide

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SYNOPSIS:

Kate Hennig's play, *The Last Wife*, focuses on the relationship between Henry VIII and his last wife, Katherine Parr (Kate). It explores various important themes through Kate's attempts to do more with her life and to change the expectations imposed on women of her time. She educates and inspires Henry's "bastard" daughters, Bess and Mary, to become something more than the King's property, married off for political and/or economic reasons. She fights for their equal rights and reinstates their succession, while restraining her own feelings and desires, especially in terms of her forced marriage to the King and her love for Thom, her husband's former brother-in-law.

CHARACTERS:

Kate (Katherine Parr): A Lady of the Court and, later, Queen of England (the last wife of King Henry VIII); she is in her early 30s.

Bess (Elizabeth): A Princess, about 11-14 years old.

Mary: A Princess in her late 20s.

Henry (Henry VIII): The King of England; he is in his 50s.

Thom: A Naval Officer in his late 30s.

Eddie (Edward VI): A Prince, about 6-9 years old. He is the heir to the throne.

THEMES:

Guilt and regret

Familial ties and bonds

Individuality versus conformity

Patriarchy, Feminism, and women's rights

Gender stereotypes

Public versus private self

Appearance versus reality

Power, control, and authority

Marriage and marital expectations

Sexual politics and relationships

RESEARCH ACTIVITIES:

1. The play focuses on historical figures. Research King Henry VIII, Katherine Parr, Queen Elizabeth I, and Queen Mary (Bloody Mary). What facts about these historical figures relate to the way Kate Hennig develops them in her play? What makes Hennig's version of these historical figures different and/or special? Is knowledge of the historical figures essential in understanding Hennig's play and her play's characters? How and why?
2. The play relates to feminism and brings up gender equality issues. For instance, Bess states: "It's not really fair, is it? Eddie's the youngest, but he's a boy, so he gets to be King. Mary and I ... well, Father decided we're officially bastards," and Kate says that progress for women can be achieved by "ditching the needlepoint." Furthermore, she tells Henry that "girls are smart. They just aren't legal." Why is feminism important in the context of Kate Hennig's play? How does gender equality figure as an important aspect in the play's development?
3. In *The Last Wife*, Kate mentions that her mother taught her Plato, Aristotle, Euripides, and Plutarch. She says: "[They are] a strong foundation for a girl's advancement," and she tells Bess that she will "teach them to [her] [since she's] a clever girl. [As a result, they] can make some progress around this place." Research these famous Greek philosophers, writers, and thinkers. What aspects of their philosophies and writings apply to Hennig's play? What does Kate's knowledge of them and of their writings/thoughts reveal about her and her philosophy of life?
4. Research the current status of females in the British Royal Family, such as the rules they have to follow and a Princess' opportunity and capability to take over the throne. What has changed in recent years when compared to the time of Henry VIII's reign?
5. Research other Kings and Queens in history and their legacy. What made them important historical figures? Do they connect to the characters and themes developed in Hennig's play? How? Explain and elaborate on the connections.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND/OR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

1. The play is titled *The Last Wife*. What atmosphere does the title evoke when first heard or read? How does the title relate to the themes developed in the play? How is the title symbolic of what transpires throughout the play?
2. Kate Hennig is a well-known playwright and theatre artist/performer. Her play revolves around feminism and gender issues. In her introduction to the play, she quotes Stephen Lewis: “There’s something deeply, mercilessly wrong in the way the world treats women. Gender equality is the single most important struggle on the planet. Patriarchy is a crime against humanity.” Do you agree with Lewis’ statement? Why is it important that plays nowadays continue to address the issues mentioned by Lewis and developed in Hennig’s play?
3. Hennig also writes, in her “playwright’s notes,” that *The Last Wife* is “a contemporary play. This is a domestic play. No historical costuming or accents required. Diversity in casting is strongly encouraged.” Why do you think these are her instructions? What atmosphere is created as a result of these choices?
4. In the play, Eddie, the heir and Prince, is kept close and coddled, while Bess, the King’s daughter, is often sent away when she displeases the King. Do you think where one is raised and how one is raised has a positive or negative influence on one’s life? Why or why not?
5. As the play progresses, many discrepancies are uncovered between what the characters are like on the outside and what they are like on the inside. Discuss all six characters in terms of what they project externally and who they are internally. What do those differences reveal about each character? How do those differences relate to the play’s themes? For instance, what do they expose about the topic of appearance versus reality or public versus private self?
6. When Henry first enters the stage, he is described as entering the room “like a bull enters a china shop.” What does this description reveal about Henry? How does it foreshadow what he has done in the past and what he does throughout the play?
7. Henry tests Kate’s knowledge by speaking to her and requiring her to reply in a few languages (Latin, Italian, French), which she does, except when he addresses her in Spanish. What does this test reveal about Henry and about Kate?
8. In the play, Henry often addresses Kate as “Parr.” What does his choice to use Kate’s last name symbolically show? Is Kate considered his equal in any way? For instance, towards the end of the play, Henry is embroidering and Kate is described “in defense attorney mode.”
9. When Kate is first seen on stage, she is described as wearing “a grey gown, with seventeen little buttons of gold, each garnished with small pearls.” Later, right before she marries Henry, she is “dressed in black – something ‘cinched at the

- waist that shows off her rack'- and carrying a briefcase.” What does Kate’s clothing, as well as the colors of her clothing, symbolically reveal about her? How do her clothes foreshadow her character’s development throughout the play? How does her physical description connect to her personality and motivation?
10. Kate says, of Henry, that “he gives [her] other things: stability, loyalty [...] He shares his children with [her]. There’s more to life [...] than sexual [...] achievement.” What does this quote reveal about Kate and her ambitions in life?
 11. Kate tells Eddie that “when people tell you you’re weak, it’s because they’re afraid of you. Maybe not of what your body can do, but what ... what the stuff inside you can do.” Do you agree with this statement? Why? What does this comment reveal about Patriarchy?
 12. Henry is expected to die soon and Bess says: “‘The earth nurtures nothing as fragile as *man*.’ That’s what Homer said. We should be ready.” How is what Bess says symbolically significant? What does this comment reveal about her and about women?
 13. Eddie tells Kate that “[Mary] said [...] [he] would learn a lot more by making things up than [he] would by doing what everyone’s done before.” What does this statement imply about Mary and about Eddie? What is the message developed in that statement and how does it relate to the larger message of Hennig’s play?
 14. After conducting research on the “real” Katherine Parr, write a compare/contrast essay on Hennig’s version of Kate and what you know about the historical Kate. Discuss and elaborate on similarities and/or differences.
 15. The play ends with Kate dying in childbirth, and Bess and Mary honoring her by bringing her books and her box of stones and herbs to her sepulcher.
 - a) What is your opinion on the ending of this play?
 - b) What is symbolically revealed in Bess’ and Mary’s gestures and final words?
 - c) How is Mary’s last statement, “We’ll make history,” significant? What does it reveal or imply? How does it support the main themes of the play?
 - d) Would you have changed the conclusion of this play? How and why?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES:

1. Students can be separated into six groups, with each group assigned a main character in the play. The groups prepare a character analysis of their assigned character, listing all the physical, psychological, and sociological characteristics of the character. Students then discuss how the character development of their assigned character contributes to the larger themes of the play.
2. Students can prepare a brief presentation on their family's history in terms of gender roles and expectations. They can present the main characteristics of their family's expectations and what impact these expectations have had on them and on their family members. Alternatively, they can prepare a brief presentation on one of the other themes developed in the play by relating the theme of their choice to their own life experience and/or personal interests.
3. Students can be asked to analyze instances of prejudice and misconceptions within the play and relate these instances to current events, social issues within their community, or to their own personal experience. For example, Henry states: "Heat – the choleric humour – is a quality possessed more by men than by women, and makes a person more intelligent [...] A woman is cold – melancholic – and therefore more deceptive."
4. Students can rewrite the ending of the play or add a scene reflecting what they think will happen to Bess and Mary in the near future.
5. Students can write a scene or song that reflects their thoughts and point of view on the issue of gender equality and its impact on an individual throughout his/her life. Students can perform or share their creation and explain the comment they are making through their creative endeavor.