

# The portrayal of katherine, the conflictual character, in shakespeare's play henry...

[History](#)



## Collecting the French Crown

When a war ends, the victor or victors claim the spoils of war—land, resources, and future alliances with other countries. In Shakespeare's Henry V, one of the spoils of war is the hand of French princess Katherine. To win the hand and heart of Katherine, King Henry transforms himself into a common soldier. In addition, he uses Katherine's lady in waiting, Alice, to translate his words as Katherine speaks little English only to speak French to Katherine. Given these tactics, Henry remains in the mindset of a soldier as he pursues Katherine. His masquerade as a soldier as opposed to a king is played to lower Katherine's defenses and his transition to speaking to her in French is a maneuver to show Katherine he intends to marry her. While Henry wants to be with Katherine out of genuine love, her lack of autonomy and ongoing presence in Shakespeare's play reveal that Katherine is the "capital demand" to be won rather than someone with any agency (Shakespeare 191).

After his battle, King Henry is prepared to collect his rewards. His marriage to the French princess becomes the main component of a treaty between England and France (Shakespeare 190). Furthermore, the marriage will make Henry the new king upon the previous king's death. When meeting the French king, Henry displays speaks with power and authority, but remains relaxed in expressing his conditions in their treaty. Even Henry's wish to speak with Katherine alone to woo her is granted to an extent given that her lady in waiting Alice stays. Once the French court leaves, Henry shockingly presents himself as a common soldier without the gifts for courting as would

be expected given his nobleman status. Henry's choice of disassociating himself from his title can be seen as a strategic move on his part of playing a soldier. He claims he cannot "mince" his words beautifully, but can only tell Katherine directly that he loves her. This is a contradiction as he was earlier calling her "fair Katherine", proclaiming her to be an angel, and stating how she is better than an Englishwoman (Shakespeare 192-3). Instead, Henry states that his only means of wooing Katherine through his physical strength. As the courtship continues, Henry begins to tease Katherine through manipulating language further; again contrasting with his earlier claim of strength being the one way he could win Katherine's love. Examples include Henry urging Katherine to "mock him mercifully because he loves her cruelly." (Lines 184-5) This shift reveals Henry inhibiting some of his previous behaviors during his former playboy days, back when he associated himself with commoners. As a king, Henry must now take what he wants. Despite this, he exudes another odd behavior: repeatedly asking Katherine if their love is mutual, thus giving her some form of agency despite her not understanding English. He tells her that he was "created with a stubborn outside, with an aspect of iron" born from thoughts of civil war from his father (Shakespeare 197). Henry, therefore, comes to Katherine as a man disassociated from his father's goals. As a result, Henry is a common man asking to be wed.

As the princess, Katherine is expected to merge England and France by marrying King Henry and produce heirs. As the war continues, much of her fate is dependent on whether or not the French army can defeat the English army and the approval of her father giving her away to King Henry. As a

result, Katherine is confined to her castle. Her presence is limited when it is vital to others around her, specifically to be with her father. Due to this, Katherine might be aware of her status as a bargaining chip and prize in the aftermath of war. A prime example would be Alice teaching her basic English by having her recite certain parts of her body: her hand, fingers, nails, arm, elbow, neck, chin, and foot (Shakespeare 93, 95). Katherine's deconstructing of her body symbolizes her role as a woman. Most of the body parts she learns have masculine connotations; her hand is what Henry will possibly win (which connects her fingers and nails), "arm" and "elbow" correlate to the weapons of war the French are using to fight, "neck" refers to a vulnerable place of injury a soldier might aim for, and "foot" has a dual meaning of her status as a woman, but also a phallic connection to male anatomy. Katherine is merely an object meant to prolong her kingdom; she is a tool for peace and a vessel to produce heirs to the throne. Her dialogue serves to show the audience her lack of agency. She wonders if she could ever love an enemy to her people as she was already "offered" to Henry—most likely without her consent. The power to accept or deny Henry's proposal is an uncharacteristic trait for a noblewoman to have, considering the choice is up to her father. It is his authority that means the most. Therefore, she must forgo her first language to be a suitable wife to King Henry. As a result, Katherine is trapped in her role and duty to her people as a noblewoman. This confinement is further signified as her lady in waiting Alice normally accompanies Katherine. Her inability to speak English is where Alice intertwines herself between Katherine and Henry.

In Henry V, Alice is Katherine's teacher, friend, and someone who looks out for her safety. In addition, Alice possibly serves as Katherine's news source of what happens outside of the castle walls and her companion. Similarly, Alice's scenes are confined in translating for Katherine and Henry. Given Alice's status in relation to Katherine, she is tasked with keeping Katherine's honor intact when both are in the presence of men. When Henry becomes more insistent in his wooing of Katherine and inches closer, it is Alice who must remind him that it is against French custom to kiss Katherine's hand, let alone her lips (Shakespeare 199). Henry disregards Alice's assertion. To Alice, it is not only disrespectful to her but also to Katherine. Her duty to protect Katherine and make sure customs set by the French king are adhered to have just been demeaned, and she was helpless in preventing the incident from occurring. Alice's duty to protect Katherine and her honor were compromised by the desires of the English king who had just earlier conquered their land and killed thousands of their people. While Katherine might have wanted the kiss, Henry still disrespected Katherine's wishes to not be kissed and Alice's reasoning of them to not be kissed until they were wed as well. Therefore, Alice was only useful as a translator and interpreter for Henry's courtship; her status as a woman and guardian to Katherine was completely omitted. As a result, her presence in the final scene of the play can be viewed as trivial.

The Hollow Crown adaptation of Henry V gives each character in the final scene realistic personalities to where each of them stands out. The reiteration of the courtship scene remains fairly intact. The only difference is the how the lines are delivered by the characters. Tom Hiddleston's King

<https://assignbuster.com/the-portrayal-of-katherine-the-conflictual-character-in-shakespears-play-henry-v/>

Henry physically removes his crown, the symbol of his nobleman identity, after the French court leaves and in the middle of wooing Mélanie Thierry's Katherine (Hiddleston). Similarly to the play, Henry displays authority and confidence in stating his conditions of the treaty. When he is alone with Katherine and Alice, his demeanor changes. The moment where his crown is taken off, Hiddleston's back is hunched; he fidgets with his hands, and attempts to maintain eye contact with Katherine. The camera follows Henry and Katherine respectively to capture the range of their emotions. As Hiddleston's King Henry continues to try and earn Katherine's love, his voice is earnest. When Hiddleston goes to his knees in front of Katherine, asking for her hand when the power begins shifting (Hiddleston). This further symbolizes Henry shedding away his high status and trying to woo Katherine as a man rather than the king who conquered her land and killed her men. As a result, Katherine is given the representative power to reject him if she chooses. She wears the crown and is able to look down at Henry, therefore Katherine holds the power. Instead, she is nervous and close to tears. The viewer can clearly see her fear in her inner thoughts and how she conducts herself; hardly looking Henry in his eyes, but rather down at the ground and always with Alice—played by Geraldine Chaplin—at her side even when Katherine treads around the palace. Both women don't smile until Henry attempts to woo Katherine in French (Hiddleston). Their smiles and giggles result in a more relaxed tone for the remainder of the scene and representation of hopeful romance. It is no longer a political merger, but a chance for love between Henry and Katherine. The difference most notable is Alice is given more significance.

Rather than being an interpreter only to be disregarded, Alice's presence is always made known. She looks after Katherine, stays close to her while keeping an eye on Henry, but what's striking is Henry addressing her more than once. Alice is the one who hears Henry's confession about how his father's "thinking of civil war" has made women fear him rather than Katherine. As he was "created with a stubborn outside, with an aspect of iron" born from thoughts of civil war, Henry was presented as a weapon rather than a human born into the world (Shakespeare 197). His assurance to Alice that he is not like his father cements a bond of trust with Alice and gives Alice further input on the matter of Henry marrying Katherine. While she does protest in Henry's wish to kiss Katherine as per custom, she doesn't stop the two. Thus, Alice cements a bond between her, Katherine, and Henry in a secret. They are all connected further when Henry and Katherine are married. Alice in the Kenneth Branagh reimagining of Henry V focuses its attention on the romance between Katherine and Henry.

The romance of Katherine and Henry is central to the final fifteen minutes of the film. The intimacy of their courtship focuses solely on Katherine and Henry, with Alice in the background close by. In the beginning, there is a considerable amount of space between the two. Katherine is seated at the opposite end of a long table not facing Henry or Alice. This interaction comes across as a negotiation more than an attempt to propose, continuing the symbolism of Katherine being a token of war. As the wooing progresses, the camera switches from a wide range shot of Henry, Katherine, and Alice to switching between close ups of Emma Thompson's Katherine and Kenneth Branagh's King Henry standing before one another to signal the two of them

<https://assignbuster.com/the-portrayal-of-katherine-the-conflictual-character-in-shakespears-play-henry-v/>

becoming closer physically and emotionally (Thompson). While there are moments where the camera focuses on Katherine's stoic reactions to Henry's wooing, the main focus is Henry's proposal. Contrasting to the Hollow Crown adaptation, Branagh's Henry doesn't appear to be nervous nor possessing any boyish charm to earn Katherine's hand. While earnest, there is no display of humility or hesitance. Henry's face and tone of voice are even and certain of his outcome, which symbolizes his power and authority as a nobleman and Katherine's lack of autonomy especially considering how this rendering of the king does not remove his crown. It's only when Branagh's Henry speaks French when the camera angle reverts back to a wide, intimate shot of the King, French princess, and lady in waiting. After the laughter between the soon to be married couple, the tone of the film returns to a light-hearted, romantic-comedy feel. Per the traditional formula, a sincere declaration of love is made to where Katherine and the audience are both caught off guard and hoping for a happy ending. Unlike the Hollow Crown reimaging and similarly to the play, Alice is of little importance.

Since she is not a woman about to be married, Alice remains static in the film; she stands in the background with her eyes to the ground when not spoken to (Thompson). She doesn't watch over the two nor does she display much signs of liveliness such as in the Hollow Crown adaption. Even in the lighthearted of Henry attempting to speak French, she doesn't share in a laugh with Katherine. However, Alice smiles when the two are to be wed, thus starting the light and romantic music in the background of the film.

While this can be understandable as she is aware of Katherine's role as the quintessential demand in establishing an alliance, Alice's role is reduced to

<https://assignbuster.com/the-portrayal-of-katherine-the-conflictual-character-in-shakespears-play-henry-v/>



her status as a lady in waiting. Her main stay in the film is being associated with Katherine; therefore Alice lacks a character and personality that is entirely her own. While her status in 15th century France is tied to being Katherine's guardian and confidant, her status remains lower than Katherine's. Now that Katherine is wife to the king, the need for Alice remains unknown.

In the end, Katherine remains the spoils of war; she has no say in whether or not she wants to marry Henry. Meanwhile, Henry plays the roles of soldier, king, common man, and a shrewd and calculating politician. Henry is argued to be feigning ignorance of the French culture to appear to humble himself in the eyes of Katherine, especially in his attempt to woo Katherine in French. This action puts her guard down and makes her more willing to be the bargaining chip in the French-English alliance. A willing spouse makes for a stronger and more stable political alliance, and Katherine has been conditioned to be a willing spouse. Her father, who offers her hand to Henry as a means for a peace treaty, conditioned her as well as Alice—the one who prepares Katherine to be an English king's wife by teaching her English. As a wife, Katherine will bear the responsibility of bearing heirs to the throne while Henry attends to the more political aspects of being a king. On the other hand, the audience is unaware of whether or not Alice will be needed after Katherine is married. It is also unclear if Katherine will remain in power within her native country. In the Hollow Crown's Henry V, Henry has died leaving behind Katherine and the future heir, staying true to the end of Shakespeare's play. Kenneth Branagh's Henry remains alive, thus ending the play happily. In the end, the role of women doesn't hold much significance.

<https://assignbuster.com/the-portrayal-of-katherine-the-conflictual-character-in-shakespears-play-henry-v/>

All that matters in Shakespeare's play is that the ending comprises of an alliance made through marriage, showcasing heterosexual desire to turn attention away from a majority of the play centered around war and male companionship.