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1536 by Ava Pickett: A Contemporary Play Analysis

“Kings don’t kill their wives! It’s not - it just doesn’t happen, alright?” (Pickett 22). Set against the political and cultural circumstances of Anne Boleyn’s execution under Henry VIII in Tudor England, the contemporary play *1536* by Ava Pickett explores the lives of three ordinary women who meet in a field in rural Essex to discuss the gossip of London. As information is spread about Anne Boleyn’s downfall, Anna, Jane, and Mariella become increasingly aware of their fragile reputations, the social policing of their sexual behavior, and the ways in which large-scale political violence is experienced at a human level. Pickett’s reorientation of the narrative of Boleyn’s execution by shifting the focus away from Henry serves as a powerful commentary on women’s vulnerability within a system that can rewrite loyalty as betrayal at any moment. *1536* is not about the king, but rather about women observing and surviving power. In a review of Almeida Theatre’s production of Pickett’s debut play titled “1536 review – three Tudor friends throw sharp light on Anne Boleyn’s execution,” The Guardian’s Miriam Gillinson stated that “*1536* is both an easy and a deeply unsettling watch,” noting that the play leaves audiences grappling with the human cost behind historical events that are reduced to spectacle. Ava Pickett’s *1536* uses the execution of Anne Boleyn as a distant yet highly influential force to explore how patriarchal power operates through surveillance, rumor, and fear rather than direct presence. Through a feminist lens informed by modern thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Judith Butler, the play shows how women’s friendships, speech, and identities are constructed and destabilized under systems that both demand and punish female visibility.

Patriarchal violence in *1536* is depicted as largely indirect yet increasingly concerning for the characters as Anne Boleyn's impending execution is normalized and becomes understated through rumor, second-hand accounts, and a sense of social awareness. Early in the play, Jane frantically meets Anna and Mariella in a field in Essex to share the news that, according to her father, Queen Anne has been arrested. The women are shocked by the information and do not believe Jane's account to be entirely true, especially Anna who says, "She's the fucking Queen, Jane! Since when have you known a queen to get arrested? I mean this is, this is old news, tired news. Right?" (Pickett 21). Anna's disbelief that a queen (a woman of high status) could be arrested and insistence that the threat is "old news, tired news" reveals Anna's reliance on the social logic that hierarchy guarantees safety, and exposes that she depends on predictability of social order to make sense of her world. Her anxious tone of voice as she attempts to neutralize the threat is how Anna negotiates fear and falsely convinces herself that the way people wield power in a hierarchical sense is always fair and just. In the greater context of the play, Anna's reaction to the news of Anne's execution represents how disbelief can often function as an initial response and defense mechanism against forces of political and systemic violence by preserving the hope that those in power do not hurt others without explanation.

In a video outlining her experience with the Genesis Almeida Playwrights Program and the creation of her debut play *1536*, Ava Pickett offers that she "was particularly inspired by this idea that things can happen in the corridors of power and you think it's not going to affect you. Like, if a king can murder his wife, how does that impact three young women in a small town hundreds of miles away?" (Pickett). Though Anna, Jane, and Mariella never witness the events of Henry VIII's violence with their own eyes, the structural distance intensifies the impact of the violence rather than lessens it. Given that the three women only hear information about the court

through rumor, their internalization and interpretation of power as well as the way that they form their sense of self in relation to that power becomes entirely dominated by uncertainty, speculation, and the need to unnecessarily anticipate consequences. Therefore, rumor becomes a role of authority in shaping how the three women speak, behave, and judge one another and power is transformed from a singular force in the king to a more pervasive force embedded in the very fabric of the social world.

Michel Foucault, a twentieth century philosopher and historian who dedicated his studies to learning how power functions in society, observed that power often operates in everyday ways that are much more subtle than designated laws or acts of violence. One of his central ideas that resulted from his studies is that “power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective. If in fact they are intelligible, this is not because they are the effect of another instance that ‘explains’ them, but rather because they are imbued, through and through, with calculation: there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives... Where there is power, there is resistance,” (Foucault, 95). Foucault observes that power is diffused through social norms, creating a multi-directional and invisible source that has no need to be physically present in order to enforce control or create a sense of surveillance. Foucault goes on to comment on the concept of surveillance, exploring how people often begin to discipline themselves when they believe that they are being watched or judged even if no authority figure is physically present. Anna, Jane, and Mariella’s uncertainty surrounding the fate of Anne Boleyn sets a form of surveillance in place, wherein they begin to self-discipline and anticipate social judgement or punishment without ever hearing direct information about how Anne is being punished. The way that patriarchal authority becomes embedded in the speech and behavior of the three women’s everyday lives reflects Foucault's idea that power is most effective when it is internalized.

As rumors of Anne's sexual autonomy and treason begin to spread and become a focal point of anxiety throughout London, Jane and Mariella learn that Anna has been sleeping with several men around the village. In a concerned conversation about Anna's behavior with Mariella, Jane shares that "they burnt two women, two villages over, in Colchester... It was for adultery," to which Mariella says "but that's not the law," (Pickett 71). Jane then responds "the law can be changed remember? Sometimes I think I can feel something coming at night. Sometimes I catch women looking at her in the road, men staring at her in the market. Sometimes I look at her and all of her beauty is gone," (Pickett 71). For Anna, her sexual agency is how she aims to defy and reject the expected standards of female obedience and chastity, especially after feeling the weight of Anne's impending execution heavily. However, Mariella and Jane become unsettled, seeing Anna's behavior as a danger to Anna and all who are associated with her, and Jane's assertion that "the law can be changed" reveals that legal and moral boundaries under a patriarchal rule can be adjusted to justify violence against women at any moment. Their conversation regarding Anna's behavior emphasizes a key idea of how female friendships can also participate in patriarchal ideologies, which Pickett aims to demonstrate through Anna, Jane and Mariella's relationship. Patriarchal systems cannot survive on top-down enforcement alone. They rely on women monitoring and disciplining one another in order to maintain a social order. Jane and Mariella participate in the social monitoring and disciplining of Anna's sexuality, transforming parts of her identity into causes of social concern and a threat to collective safety.

Mirroring Anne Boleyn, much of Anna's voice becomes filtered through layers of rumor and interpretation, demonstrating how women's narratives are rarely their own. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak comments on this concept in her prominent essay titled "Can the Subaltern

Speak?” published in 1985. In this essay, she explores how Western power structures dictate whether marginalized voices are heard. She argues that “the subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish... The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read.” (Spivak 104). Spivak’s assertion demonstrates the complicated idea that the female voice is shaped, diminished, and sometimes silenced completely by dominant systems of power, suggesting that women are never recognized on their own terms. The silencing is further reinforced throughout the play as Jane and Mariella’s concern for Anna shifts to judgement, they internalize the idea that Anna’s behavior is morally wrong, and refuse to recognize her voice as valid even in the context of a private conversation being held between friends.

Pickett explains that Anna, Jane, and Mariella’s understanding of how Anne Boleyn’s death is received by the public demonstrates the normalization of the silencing of female voices. After Anne was arrested and removed from the palace, she was tried on charges of treason which included adultery, incest, and plotting to kill King Henry VIII. However, this trial is historically recognized as a ‘show trial,’ or a trial with a predetermined outcome. Therefore, no matter what Anne said to defend herself at the jury, the outcome was always going to be execution. Anne’s show trial is spoken about from Jane’s perspective in the play when she asks, “well he didn’t do it, did he? It’s not murder if, if she had a trial, it’s justice, kings don’t kill their wives for no reason,” (Pickett 97). Jane’s logic illustrates how the legal performance of a show trial is used to legitimize acts of political violence, and in this case, legalize murder. The spectacle of Anne’s show trial and execution is one example of male authority being reaffirmed as female voices are systematically excluded from legal and narrative power. Even as Anne is formally heard in her

trial, her words become meaningless in a system that has already determined her fate, demonstrating how institutional structures can simulate justice while still committing violence against women.

In the aftermath of Anne's execution, Anna, Jane and Mariella grapple with how 'justice' is absorbed into everyday life and how the violence committed against Anne remains unquestioned and even celebrated by the public. Shortly after Anne's death, King Henry VIII married Jane Seymour, to which Jane observes that "they've kept the pubs open. The men are celebrating." (Pickett 98). Pickett's stage directions paint the image that "they all stare at each other, as somewhere else, men celebrate a whore who has been killed, toast to a virgin in a crown," (Pickett 98). The opposition of the words "whore" and "virgin" demonstrates how Anne's death is publicly seen as a celebration of moral restoration that serves patriarchal storytelling. *1536* illustrates how silencing does not end with death. It continues in the stories that people repeat, and the labels they accept and assign. Judith Butler's "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" clarifies how the process of silencing or narrative shifting continues to occur after death. Butler argues that, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender," (Butler 43-44). As seen in *1536*, Anna, Jane, and Mariella's lives and identities are also shaped by this same system of repetition and surveillance and their idea of what it means to be 'good' is constantly influenced by rumor, fear, and their observation of Anne's death. Therefore, Butler's idea that gender is "a set of

repeated acts” is shown not only in how Anne is remembered, but in how the three women regulate their own behavior in response to her story. Throughout *1536*, Anna’s sexuality, Jane’s anxiety, and Mariella’s attempts at moral caution are all shaped by the anticipation of judgement, revealing how these “compulsory frames” structure even private interactions.

Through *1536* and her interpretation of the historical events of Tudor England using the lens of three ordinary women, Ava Pickett aims to suggest that patriarchal power extends far and persists in the structures that continue to govern how women are represented and believed. Anna, Jane and Mariella illustrate how deeply internalized these systems of surveillance are as they begin to form distrust in one another and become more aware of how quickly female identity can be rewritten to suit the needs of the patriarchal narrative. By the end of the play, survival becomes bound to compromise through silence, conformity, or participation in the narratives that erase female identity. Pickett leaves audiences not only with the memory of Anne Boleyn’s execution, but with the broader question about how histories of violence are repeated in quieter forms and how easily false or forced narratives become accepted as truth.

Works Cited

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