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**DISMANTLING POWER STRUCTURES:
A FOUCAULDIAN EXAMINATION OF PHYLLIDA LLOYD'S
ALL-FEMALE SHAKESPEARE TRILOGY**

Emily Enlow

T. E. Phyllida Lloyd's trilogy of *Julius Caesar* (2012), *Henry IV* (2014), and *The Tempest* (2016) produced at Donmar Warehouse in London (which was filmed at the conclusion of the five-year project) successfully tells Shakespeare's stories using a company of female actors who not only take on the roles called for in the scripts, but also the roles of inmates in a women's prison. In an interview for *Shakespeare Unlimited*, a podcast sponsored by the Folger Shakespeare Library, Lloyd explained that the company worked with Holloway Prison in London to dive deeper into the implications of their choice of setting. She said that through the development process the "prison became less a device and more absolutely fundamental to [their] mission."¹ What began as a project meant to provide a wider range of opportunities for women within the Shakespeare canon became a vehicle to highlight the struggles of inmates limited by the penal system and their pasts. And, not surprisingly, we can come to a better understanding of these struggles if we think about these productions in terms of the ideas of French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Foucault was one of the most prominent figures in the post-structuralist era of literary criticism. He wrote *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* to investigate the penal system, identify its origins, and question how it may be reformed. Foucault discusses the power structures at play within

¹ Phyllida Lloyd, "We Are Governed With Our Mothers' Spirits," interview by Barbara Bogaev, *Shakespeare Unlimited*, June 27, 2017.

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a prison as a microcosm of society and how those power structures are perpetuated. Applying his ideas to Lloyd's trilogy illuminates that her production concept links the power structures of Shakespeare's plays to the power structures in prisons, which, in turn, highlights the heightened circumstances of incarcerated women.

The plays, as one can imagine, are aesthetically rather dreary. Grey sets and costumes, as well as harsh overhead lighting and found objects, are used to create the prison. However, this design is effective in emphasizing the barrenness of prison life and forcing a focus on the stories being told. It is clear that each actor in the company has a deep understanding of not only the Shakespearean character they embody, but also the character of the inmate who performs from within her prison confines in all three productions.

To supplement the trilogy, the company put together an educational packet that includes a video diary featuring monologues from the point of view of the inmate characters. The actors wrote the monologues after meeting with the incarcerated women in the prison that were selected to work with Lloyd. These monologues give interested audiences more context for the prison setting and tell the stories of the fictional incarcerated characters behind the Shakespearean characters. Most notable of these diaries is that of Hannah, an inmate played by Dame Harriet Walter (who, Lloyd noted in her *Shakespeare Unlimited* interview, inspired the trilogy).² Hannah plays Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, King Henry in *Henry IV*, and Prospero in *The Tempest*. She serves as the leader of the drama group and as a mentor for the younger women in the company. In Walter's video diary (in character as Hannah), she describes the process of rehearsing the plays. She delves into how she and the other women were stripped of their identities when they were incarcerated, becoming just a number,

² Lloyd, *Shakespeare Unlimited*.

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“an offender” instead of an individual. But the plays themselves act as “purgative” for the (fictional) inmates as they reform and learn to grow within the confines of the prison.³ In this sense, the plays reveal the kinds of power, however limited, the women could exercise for themselves. And this is a key element in Foucault’s philosophy of power.

Foucault defines power as a verb, not a noun. To him, it is not a possession, but something one enacts. He says, “it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions.”⁴ In other words, power is the culmination of an action and the effects of that action on another person or group of people. Everyone can, and does, exercise power, even if they’re not in a privileged position. The ability to exercise power is made possible through continuous demonstrations of power that are accepted by those being acted upon, effectively maintaining the structure.

Lloyd’s trilogy centers around such demonstrations of power that permeate the lives of the incarcerated women. At the start of Donmar’s *Julius Caesar*, inmate Charday (played by Jade Anouka) welcomes the audience saying, “We’ve chosen the plays for our trilogy because they’re the ones that connected to our stories.”⁵ *Julius Caesar* tells the story of taking down a corrupt government only to be replaced by a new one, demonstrating the cyclical nature of power-grabbing. *Henry*

³ *The Prison Context: Prison Character Introductions*. Performance by Harriet Walter, Donmar Warehouse, 2017.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, Inc., 1995), 26-27.

⁵ *Julius Caesar*, directed by Phyllida Lloyd (2017; London, England, U.K.: Donmar Warehouse and Illuminations), <https://www-digitaltheatreplus-com.libproxy.furman.edu/education/collections/donmar-warehouse/julius-caesar>.

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IV explores the line between peasantry and royalty and questions if one can be honorable and common. *The Tempest*, though the most fantastical of the three stories, stays grounded in its examination of isolation and servitude. The themes of power, justice, and freedom that permeate all three plays are only amplified when the actors represent women who are incarcerated.

Though there are certainly oppressive power structures present in all three of the plays chosen for the trilogy, Shakespeare capitalizes on the Foucauldian notion of power as a verb rather than a noun. In *The Tempest*, Prospero demonstrates power over Ariel by binding them to servitude with the promise eventual freedom. Ariel does his bidding because they believe if they work hard enough and do what they are asked, they will escape servitude.⁶ It can be said, then, that Ariel is complicit in Prospero's exercises of power and, therefore, exercises power of their own. Ariel implicates this early on in Act One of the play by saying the following:

All hail, great master, grave sir, hail! I come
To answer thy best pleasure; be't to fly,
To swim, to dive into the fire, to ride
On the curl'd clouds. To thy strong bidding, task
Ariel and all his quality. (I.ii.189-193)⁷

Ariel chooses to operate within Prospero's system and assert their magical powers over others (a physical demonstration of power, rather than power granted by a privileged position).

Shakespeare's *Henry IV* revolves around two men fighting for a position of power, but the action that leads up to that provides more complex examples of power-grabbing. Prince Hal has a privileged position of power as a royal, but

⁶ William Shakespeare, "The Tempest," in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).

⁷ Shakespeare, "The Tempest," 1664.

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Hal exercises power by subverting that position, “mak[ing] offense a skill”.⁸ He chooses to steal and drink instead of performing his princely duties, knowing that he will never face the consequences of a common man (like fines or arrests).⁹ He waits to own up to his privileged position in hopes that, after behaving as a ne’er-do-well, his acts as prince will come as a shock and make him seem more successful. Hal summarizes this plot in one of his most famous speeches:

I know you all, and will a while uphold
The unyok’d humor of your idleness,
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wond’red at
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapors that did seem to strangle him.
(I.ii.195-203)

Like Prince Hal, Falstaff challenges his status in life and the power structures of his society. Falstaff does not have a position of power, but consistently exercises power in a Foucauldian sense by undermining those who actually have authority. Shakespeare gives Falstaff, seemingly the lowest on the social totem pole, one of the largest demonstrations of power in the play: acting as a father and counsel for Hal when Hal dismisses King Henry.¹⁰ Because he is a thief and a drunkard, however, Falstaff is not always successful in his exercises

⁸ William Shakespeare, “The First Part of Henry the Fourth,” in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 893.

⁹ Shakespeare, “The First Part of Henry the Fourth,” 893.

¹⁰ Shakespeare, “The First Part of Henry the Fourth,” 904.

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of power. At the conclusion of the play, Hal steps into his position of power and abandons Falstaff,¹¹ an act Falstaff does not challenge because the existing power structure dictates that he must remain docile or face consequences.

Similarly to *Henry IV*, *Julius Caesar* questions if there is such a thing as ideal power and, if so, what that power looks like. Caesar is unpopular and, therefore, those ranked below him choose to exercise their power against him. Early in the play, Cassius explains to Brutus that Caesar is no more fit to rule than they are, claiming,

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
Brutus and Caesar: what should be in that "Caesar"?
Why should that name be sounded more than yours?
Write them together, yours is as fair a name;
Sound them, it doth become the mouth as well;
Weigh them, it is as heavy; conjure with 'em,
"Brutus" will start a spirit as soon as "Caesar."
Now in the name of all the gods at once,
Upon what meat doth this our Caesar feed
That he is grown so great? (I.ii.140-150)¹²

Discontent rises and the senators kill Caesar in favor of a better leader, exercising power from below, but the existing power structure doesn't die with him. Caesar's successor challenges Cassius and Brutus and no real change is made. In that, Shakespeare suggests, aligning with a Foucauldian paradigm of power, that there will never be an "ideal" leader because power will always come from everyone, not just a single body.

¹¹ William Shakespeare, "The Second Part of Henry the Fourth," in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 964.

¹² William Shakespeare, "Julius Caesar," in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 1154.

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With all three productions set in a prison, a looming power structure is apparent between the guards and the inmates acting in the plays. The act of the inmates performing the plays, however, is an exercise of power that reinforces Foucauldian ideals rather than the traditional concept of power typically associated with the prison complex. The guards exhibit their power by leading the inmates in and out of the playing space, making sure the women stay in line and conform. In fact, the plays are only allowed to be performed (in the world of the prison) because the guards permit the inmates to participate in Hannah's drama club, but the threat of the performance being taken away is always an underlying possibility if people misbehave.

This assumption is confirmed in *Henry IV* during the tavern scene where Mistress Quickly is antagonized and the inmates go off script. They add in a bit that they had supposedly rehearsed and agreed to cut where they call the inmate playing Mistress Quickly "an otter" because she is "slippery" in her sex life and use derogatory anatomical slang which sends the inmate playing Quickly off stage crying. A guard enters, followed by Hannah (who has stepped out of her character of King Henry), to assess the situation. The guard says nothing, but her presence makes the inmates visibly uncomfortable. She represents an upset in the power structure and an attempt to regain control. Hannah reminds the inmates to behave and "stick to the Shakespeare," then exercising power which has been granted to her because the other inmates respect her. Unlike the authoritative imposed power of the guard, Hannah's exhibition of power is defensive and, therefore, well-received.¹³ In this instance, Hannah is defending the power of the play and the power the inmates have exercised in

¹³ *Henry IV*, directed by Phyllida Lloyd (2017; London, England, U.K.: Donmar Warehouse and Illuminations), <https://www-digital-theatreplus-com.libproxy.furman.edu/education/collections/donmar-warehouse/henry-iv>.

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their performance that allows them to rise above their circumstances and create their own meaning out of Shakespeare's texts.

Similarly, in *The Tempest*, Hannah (this time playing Prospero) exercises her power to defend the powers of the play. Prospero delivers the famous "we are such stuff as dreams are made on" speech while popping large balloons that, only moments before, were used as the backdrop for projections of the dreams of the inmates, including the golden arches of McDonald's and the promise of something as simple as a cheeseburger.¹⁴ Prospero's balloon popping, a physical demonstration of power, is done in order to keep the other characters grounded in his world instead of venturing into a vision of the world that would leave him isolated. The other women do not challenge this act of power, effectively maintaining the overarching structure of power at play between the characters and the inmates.

Despite this, the guards demonstrate their power in other ways throughout the trilogy, such as interrupting the action of the plays during pivotal moments when the incarcerated women exercise power to rebel against injustice in the existent power structure. *Julius Caesar* is cut short at the crowning of Octavius because the guards, seemingly worried that the inmates' excitement might get out of hand, declare that recreation time is over. After Hal renounces Falstaff in *Henry IV*, the actor playing Falstaff (Sophie Stanton) begins to scream and cry and the guards don't allow the other inmates to continue. The inmates hit the floor and wait for further instruction, physically demonstrating how they are below the guards in the power structure. It can be assumed that the inmates have been trained to obey the orders of the guards unquestioningly in such situations or risk consequences. Since

¹⁴ *The Tempest*, directed by Phyllida Lloyd (2017; London, England, U.K.: Donmar Warehouse and Illuminations), <https://www-digitaltheatreplus-com.libproxy.furman.edu/education/collections/donmar-warehouse/the-tempest>.

both of these moments of interruption occur at points when an underdog has successfully disrupted the existing power structure, the guards step in as a reminder to the audience that the women being watched on stage are unable to enact reform within the power structure of the prison outside of performance. They have, however, proven that they are capable of exercising power even though they don't hold a privileged position, reinforcing Foucault's notion that an act of power can come from anyone, not just those at the top of the social pyramid.

The key example that exhibits a Foucauldian power structure is that of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon. The panopticon is a circular prison model where a single watchtower can see every cell in the prison. In this model, prisoners don't know when they're being watched but know that they theoretically always can be seen, meaning power could be asserted over the prisoners both physically and mentally at any time. Foucault expands and comments upon Bentham's model, saying the idea of the panopticon trickles into society at large, reflecting a looming authoritative body in power that cannot be reached. This causes those being monitored to internalize the rules of the oppressive body, which ultimately leads to a self-disciplined society that voluntarily yields its power.¹⁵

The Lloyd trilogy effectively demonstrates the constant surveillance of the prison without distracting from the action of the play. In all three productions, guards lead the inmates into the playing space before they begin their performance and escort them out at the play's conclusion, staying in the wings near the perimeter during the performance. Though not consistently visible, they come in and out during scene transitions or in moments of conflict in the plot. Around the top of the audience is a fence, allowing guards and prisoners not on stage to monitor what's happening. On a practical level, this reinforces the prison setting for the audience but also

¹⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 200-203.

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serves to remind the inmates that though they may be escaping their situations by putting on a character, they cannot misbehave or abuse the privilege of performance. With constant surveillance comes the threat of punishment. *Julius Caesar*, in particular, uses surveillance and its potential consequences as a tool for the story. Television monitors are present around the space and the threat of media surveillance adds higher stakes for the conspirators plotting against Caesar.

There's a level of Panopticon-esque surveillance that becomes even more prevalent when theatricality is taken into account. In a theater, it can be argued that the audience becomes the guard in the tower watching the action of the prison taking place but remaining distanced from the prisoners, or actors, themselves. The actors are in a position where they could be seen by any number of the 400 audience members at any time, whether they are the main focus of the scene or not, making it imperative to always be "on." In other words, the power to behave in a way that deviates from the behavior expected of them is stripped and they, like the prisoners in the Panopticon model, must conform to the expectations of the power structure (in this case, the expectations of what makes a good, interesting to watch actor). However, part of what makes theater impactful is that there is power in subverting expectations. Though actors may be expected to behave in one way, the women in this company have exerted their power to take on roles not written for them that challenge their and the audiences' understanding of themselves.

Yet the audience-as-guard model isn't the only one that exists in the trilogy. Perhaps the audience is not in the tower at all but instead act as the imprisoned, stuck in their seats waiting to be called out or directly addressed without having control over the story being handed to them and powerless when faced with the power exercised by the performers. In Donmar's *Julius Caesar*, the audience has no idea Caesar is going to be assassinated sitting among them and they have no

way to stop it; they sit and are forced to take it in.¹⁶ This action places the audience in the shoes of the inmates who are consistently acted upon by an outside force and given little agency over their situation and must find ways to exercise their power from within. From a more purpose-driven perspective, the actors teach the audience or leave them with a message of some sort; in this case, that message is to question the power structures in place that are being overturned by Shakespeare's characters and the ones that limit the inmates. The audience then has the opportunity to exercise their own power beyond the stage using the knowledge they've gained from both Shakespeare's words and the interpretation presented by Lloyd and company.

Lloyd's concept for the trilogy has revolutionized contemporary Shakespeare performance by challenging gender norms on stage as well as in the eyes of society, while simultaneously calling into question the beliefs largely held about incarcerated women and the structures within which they operate. Hannah's supplementary inmate introduction video discussed the erasure of individual stories and lamented their grouping into the singular category of "offender." Lloyd and the company of these three plays have effectively highlighted individual stories of inmates and grounded them in universal human truths that make it almost impossible for audience members to avoid empathizing with both Shakespeare's characters and the characters of the inmates. In doing this, Lloyd has given voice to those typically oppressed by existing power structures in prisons, on stage, and in society at large.

¹⁶ *Julius Caesar*, dir. Lloyd

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