**Defining the BBC Shakespeare Unlocked season ‘in festival terms’**

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**Abstract:** Shakespeare Unlocked is a BBC season broadcast on television and radio from March to June 2012. It included BBC television’s first adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in seven years (the second tetralogy, packaged as *The Hollow Crown*); documentaries showing Royal Shakespeare Company actors and directors working on plays to ‘unlock’ their meaning, on Elizabethan and Jacobean history, Italy in Shakespeare and Shakespeare in India; and a dedicated episode of the quiz show QI.  On Radios 3 and 4 there were further play adaptations; a series of essays on *Shakespeare and Love*; a documentary rooted in twenty early modern objects; and interviews with diverse figures from public life about their most memorable Shakespeare encounters. The season was timed to complement the Cultural Olympiad, part of London’s 2012 Olympic offerings. This article considers Shakespeare Unlocked as a Shakespeare festival, in terms of the season’s design and marketing as well as in its reception by professional critics and audiences on Twitter. It also evidences the way in which Shakespeare Unlocked constitutes the first BBC Shakespeare season to be made and received on social media.

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Shakespeare festivals have attracted increasing attention in Shakespeare studies over recent years – with a glut of book-length studies of Garrick’s 1769 Shakespeare-less Stratford Jubilee published in the same year as the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth (Fernie 2017: 123, Dobson 1992: 214). Not only that, but the type of attention they are given has changed. Many of last century’s publications on the topic take the form of commemorative guides to or attempt to catalogue extant Shakespeare festivals the world over. Similarly, Marcus Gregio’s 2004 publication logs the contact details of recurrent Shakespeare festivals worldwide. It does not offer a definition of the term beyond evolving subcategories: ‘Major Festivals’ (‘the *crème de le crème*’ [sic] and ‘the best theatre organisations’) and ‘Minor Festivals’ (‘still valuable’, ‘produce important work’ and ‘organisation[s that] did not respond to my query’ [request for information]) (Gregio 2004:16-17). However, many twenty-first century studies have thought critically about Shakespeare festivals in terms of audiences, reviewing practices, national and cultural values, non-Anglophone Shakespeare and even inalienable human rights. These include *The Making of the National Poet* (Dobson 1992), *The Cultural Value of Publicly Funded Theatre* (Linnemann 2010), *A Year of Shakespeare* (Edmondson, Prescott and Sullivan 2013), *Shakespeare Beyond English* (Bennett and Carson 2013), *Shakespeare and the Global Stage* (Prescott and Sullivan 2015), and *Shakespeare for Freedom* (Fernie 2017). Some, such as *Shakespeare in Cambridge*, fall on a continuum between commemorating a particular festival and theorizing about the affordances of its location and ethos (Muir 2015). Of the above, only *A Year of Shakespeare* includes television Shakespeare as a festival element: all contribute to defining festive qualities that can be used to read Shakespeare seasons on television.

In this article, I harness these existing definitions and delimitations of festival, posited historically in relation to live events and performances, to show that the discourse – used by the BBC, television critics, and the viewing public on social media – actively constructs the Shakespeare Unlocked season as possessing traits definitive of festival. These include a religiosity of activity; celebration of history; celebrity and quality; rejuvenation and renewal; limited and shared space and time. I acknowledge throughout the challenges to thinking of Shakespeare Unlocked, namelyas a festival where it appears to fall short of the criteria outlined in festival theory. However, I argue that the affordances of digital technology mean that more of these criteria are met than in previous BBC Shakespeare seasons, crucially accessibility and participation were expanded. A parallel argument for the primacy of digital technology in facilitating activity and participation is made by in *A Year of Shakespeare*: Stanley Wells describes it, in its foreword, as ‘a pioneering volume, made possible only by use of the Internet’ (Edmondson, Prescott and Sullivan 2013: xxiii). This is echoed by Paul Edmondson in its epilogue: ‘This project began with blogs and social media. The book began to take shape about a third of the way into the project’ (Edmondson, Prescott and Sullivan 2013: 269). This article focuses on the 2012 BBC Shakespeare Unlocked in its own right and does not consider the subsequent 2016 BBC Shakespeare Festival, which has its own distinguishing set of characteristics (for one, its festivity was explicit in its title) and deserves detailed analyses of its own. It does not constitute a history of Shakespeare festivals because it is concerned primarily with attending to television and social media Shakespeare, rather than the more well-represented theatre. Recent existing models for focusing in-depth on single Shakespeare festivals, such as the World Shakespeare Festival and its subsidiary Globe to Globe Festival, include Edmondson et al. and Bennett and Carson. Work on single BBC seasons includes Bulman (1984) and Willis (1991) on the BBC Shakespeare, Dawes (2012) and Wray (2006) on BBC Shakespea(Re)-Told.

Shakespeare Unlocked aired in the UK from March to June 2012. The BBC’s publicity narrative was that the season would herald and lead into the Cultural Olympiad, itself a veritable nesting set of bardic festivals containing the World Shakespeare Festival and, within that, the Globe to Globe festival. Indeed, Shakespeare Unlocked and the World Shakespeare Festival shared some content, such as *Julius Caesar*. The season included the first BBC series of Shakespeare’s plays in seven years (the second tetralogy, packaged as *The Hollow Crown*); a performance film of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s *Julius Caesar* (directed by Gregory Doran and on stage in Stratford-upon-Avon at the time of broadcast as part of the World Shakespeare Festival); documentaries showing RSC actors and directors working on three plays to ‘unlock’ their meaning – *Macbeth, A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* and *Romeo and Juliet –* in a series within the season titled *Shakespeare Unlocked*;[[1]](#endnote-1) actors discussing their approaches to roles or groups of roles – Joely Richardson on Shakespeare’s women and Jeremy Irons on the Henries for example (*Shakespeare Uncovered*); young actors learning from professional theatre practitioners (*Macbeth, the Moviestar and Me, Off By Heart: Shakespeare*); Elizabethan and Jacobean history (*Simon Schama’s Shakespeare, The King and the Playwright*); travelogues on countries that inspired or host performances of the plays (*Shakespeare’s Italy* and *Felicity Kendal’s Indian Shakespeare Quest*); and a dedicated episode of the comedy quiz show *QI*. On BBC Radios 3 and 4 there were further play adaptations (*Twelfth Night, Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Tempest*); a clutch of essays on *Shakespeare and Love*; a documentary rooted in twenty early modern objects (*Shakespeare’s Restless World*); and interviews with diverse figures from public life about their most memorable Shakespeare encounters (*My Own Shakespeare*). The schedule for the season alone demonstrates a festival-appropriate quantity. Erin Sullivan aggregates the amount of Shakespearean activity in the 2012 three times in a nine-page chapter while Paul Prescott opts to describe it as ‘countless’ (Sullivan 2013: 10, 11; Prescott 2013: 30). Shakespeare Unlocked totalled around thirty-eight hours of broadcast time: almost two-thirds shorter than the 1978-85 series *BBC Shakespeare*, but more than five times that of the 2005 season *Shakespeare Re-Told*. Shakespeare Unlocked also evidences the requisite generic variety of the programming, noted by De Coubertin in relation to the Olympics and as traits of a Shakespeare festival by Edmonson et al., Linnemann (Linnemann 2010: 239),[[2]](#endnote-2) and Bennett and Carson – who find the World Shakespeare Festival branded the ‘biggest celebration of Shx ever staged’ (Bennett and Carson 2013:1) on its website and also note the fact and marketing of its ‘plurality of cultural expression’ and ‘diversity of experience’ (Bennett and Carson 2013: 8).

**Shakespeare Unlocked on Twitter**

Shakespeare Unlocked was the first Shakespeare season to be widely anticipated, circulated and received on social media sites – a gift for those attending to audience reception.[[3]](#endnote-3) Previously, audiences might have written about BBC Shakespeare seasons somewhat publicly on fansites and message boards, sent emails or letters to the BBC postbag, newspaper television supplements, television magazines or audience feedback programmes such as *Points of View*. This article argues that the more publicly accessible, unmediated and immediate dialogue enabled by social media marked a turning point, allowing Shakespeare Unlocked to fulfil more of the criteria for a festival, to a greater extent, than any previous season. In the following section, I demonstrate the season’s social media presence with reference to one prominent social media platform: Twitter. This and other social media platforms feature in studies of performing, adapting and appropriating Shakespeare (Linnemann 2010, Aebischer 2016, Calbi 2013, Iyengar and Desmet 2012, O’Neill 2014); marketing Shakespearean performance and, not unproblematically, extending access (Way 2016b); as well as teaching Shakespeare using Twitter (Ullyot 2014, Carroll and Cameron). Stephen O’Neill’s 2015 article ‘Shakespeare and Social Media’ reviews existing publications. Less exists by way of reception studies.

I have pragmatically chosen Twitter, launched in July 2006, to evidence the social media circulation and reception of Shakespeare Unlocked, partly for the number of sites and tools offering analytic and search support for tweets but mainly because of the amount of stable, publicly-available content (which doesn’t require registration, following, being followed, or friending to access it. Excellent publications which offer a history of Twitter, its evolution, and usage for those without first-hand experience include *Twitter and Society* (Weller et al) and *Twitter* (Murthy). I used Twitter’s search function to find tweets posted during 2012 featuring Shakespeare Unlocked titles or variations of them e.g. #HiV for #Henry V. Sixty-two tweets about Shakespeare Unlocked programmes either included #shakespeareseason or the words ‘Shakespeare’ and ‘season’ in their message. They were related to promotional material relating to the season in newspapers, *The Stage* magazine, and other media; to alert potential individuals or groups of viewers to upcoming shows (e.g. those following the BBC, RSC, and BUFVC on Twitter)*;* to reviews of individual programmes; to shared images of the stars (often with reference to their sex appeal); behind-the-scenes news, ranging from NBC’s co-funding the *Hollow Crown* to filming locations; and opinions about the season proving the BBC’s worth. The tweets were unanimously positive about the opportunity offered by the season for sustained engagement with Shakespeare, culture, celebrity actors or a combination of these features. Five additional tweets used the term ‘festival’: four framed the BBC’s Shakespeare season within the London 2012 Festival or the World Shakespeare Festival. @Jensbrol uniquely harked back to the origins of the term in a religious celebration marked with an abundance of food and drink: ‘“BBC’s Shakespeare Unlocked can only be described as a feast” Gorging on Shakespeare in 2012 – No Sweat Shakespeare’, and linked to the website of that Shakespeare resource[[4]](#endnote-4). Many tweets that I did locate featured multiple hashtags or keywords e.g. #TheHollowCrown and #HenryIV, and thus showed up in multiple searches; many surfaced more than once as retweets or modified tweets with new twitter handles, hashtags, words and emoticons included. However, some tweets about the season will not have been located by these searches: they might feature the playwright’s, actors’ names, broadcaster or short titles that I did not anticipate. On the other hand, searching using broader terms such as ‘Shakespeare’, ‘Tom Hiddleston’ or ‘BBC’ in 2012 alone yielded an unmanageable quantity and relevance of tweets. These search issues suggest just a few challenges towards giving a comprehensive account of the season’s reception.

The results depicted on the accompanying graph further suggest that tweeters’ sense of the programmes’ belonging to a season or serial ensured their spreadability (the amount of appeal ideas and images have in terms of digital sharing and the ease with which they can be circulated digitally, Jenkins et al). In fact, with the exception of *Off By Heart*, the eight most-returned hashtags or keywords in my search were for the season or a series within it[[5]](#endnote-5). The greatest number of original tweets featuring title-derived hashtags or keywords came from searches for ‘Hollow Crown’ (115), ‘Shakespeare Unlocked’ (92), and ‘Shakespeare season’ (62). The Radio 3 series *Shakespeare’s Restless World* featured in tweets more than might have been expected, given it has just over 2 million listeners per quarter compared to 11 million viewers for a single evening of a single Saturday night, prime-time reality television show, as well as widespread, generalized perceptions of the station’s ‘old’ audience and Twitter’s ‘young’ users (Anon. 2016b). Explanations include the length and regularity of the series (one of its twenty episodes was aired each weekday morning for four weeks) as well as the familiarity of the format, presenter and his institution[[6]](#endnote-6).

Sharon O’Dair has previously criticised academics’ tendency to exaggerate the popularity of new, public-facing Shakespeare products and platforms, blogs specifically. It is important to recognise that the popularity of tweeting about Shakespeare Unlocked was relatively limited in terms of sheer volume (O’Dair 2011). In 2012, on average, 340 million tweets were made each day worldwide (Anon 2011). I have struggled to get data on how many users tweeted included the word ‘Shakespeare’ in their message per day for 2012, but in December 2015 *Tweetchup* suggested it was between 1200-1400 (Anon. 2015). Bear in mind that the number of active twitter users has roughly doubled between 2012 and 2015, also that ‘Shakespeare’ is still in use as a family name, so daily occurrences of the word in relation to the playwright may have been somewhat lower. While the *Hollow Crown* was named in over a hundred tweets in 2012 and images from the series appeared in many more without Shakespeare- or season-related tags, other programmes were named in tweets totalling only double figures. A few got no mentions using their titles or parts thereof at all – including *Macbeth, the Moviestar and Me; Shakespeare Uncovered* and *My Own Shakespeare*. This might be explained respectively by their airing late at night; one episode of *Shakespeare Uncovered* being pushed back by coverage of Wimbledon overrunning; and the twenty-nine different public figures featured attracting tweets mentioning them individually, without the season or programme hashtags.

It is true that, in investigating Shakespeare Unlocked’s Twitter community’s reception of the season/season’s programmes, I saw tweets from individuals and institutions that might be termed part of the global ‘Shakespeare Industry’ (theatre companies that stage Shakespeare, publications – like *The Stage* and *The Independent* – that review those productions, and heritage organisations dedicated to him) as well as scholars, students and enthusiasts.[[7]](#endnote-7) Organs that represent teachers plus individual teachers of Shakespeare in English, English as an Additional Language and Drama classes tweeted the season.[[8]](#endnote-8) Yet Twitters users outside this clique easily outnumbered and out-posted these familiar, fellow Shakespeareans. There were tweeters not defined by their relationship to Shakespeare, some (but not all) with a professional connection to or investment in Shakespeare Unlocked, working in television (including for the BBC and rival broadcasters), theatre (playwrights, agents, designers, hair and make-up artists), arts and heritage industries (blue badge guides, digital creatives, composers).[[9]](#endnote-9) Authors, spanning genres including young adult fiction, mystery, and fantasy, and media from novels to screenwriting, were strongly represented among tweeters of Shakespeare Unlocked.[[10]](#endnote-10) Many posting on the season constructed themselves as belonging to groups that are similar in terms of niche interest to that of Shakespeareans, though arguably larger in size, including tweeters who self-identify in their profiles as bloggers, microbloggers and fans of television (there were several accounts dedicated to issuing alerts about UK television scheduling), film, and theatre.[[11]](#endnote-11) In addition, online fan accounts for and individual fans of actors and other entertainers (Tom Hiddleston, Benedict Cumberbatch, David Tennant and Bill Bailey, the latter appearing in the *QI* episode) were immensely active throughout the season, mentioning actors’ official accounts, Twitter fan accounts or using relevant hashtags in their tweets to reach the objects of their fandom and other fans[[12]](#endnote-12). Of course, there was overlap: some tweeters were both Shakespeare professors and paid-up ‘Hiddles’ and Tennant fanatics. Others did not identify as part of a group of Shakespearean, arts or literary professionals, students or enthusiasts in their tweets or profiles, but tweeted praise of a particular programme in the season. These include @lisajsspearman (Mum and accountant) and @fizzyliving (property management professional). Having given an overview of the wide-ranging constituency of tweeters of Shakespeare Unlocked in terms of the sector, geographical location, and self-labelling given in (or on websites linked to) their profile, I return to specific tweets and interactions between users throughout the article to evidence their construction and reception of the season in festival terms.

**Shakespeare Unlocked in newspapers**

In print media there was a tendency to dwell on the season’s individual series and episodes, segmenting the season against the spirit of festival. This can be explained partly with reference to the way that writing about television works in the nation’s prominent news publications: the emphasis on the daily or the weekly; on reviewing’s function to ‘sell’ today’s or the week ahead’s programmes to the publication’s readers; and a dedication to evaluating that which has most recently been screened (in columns titled along the lines of ‘last night’s viewing’), suggesting that readers have a strictly ephemeral and topical interest in television (an exception to this might be the ‘best of’ lists that appear towards the end of each year in many newspaper’s arts and culture supplements as well as nostalgic all-time greatest lists). This is arguably a legacy of the live and fleeting television broadcasting of yore – if you miss it, it’s gone forever. Continuing to publish about television in this way sits oddly with several decades’ worth of viewers’ ability to capture broadcasts and watch them out of schedule: video-taping, DVD-recording and buying, on-demand internet streaming. Whether such outdated assumptions about readers’ viewing habits are a contributing factor in UK newspapers’ declining readership is beyond the scope of this article. However, public appetite for treating programmes in the series to lengthier discussion than that afforded in printed television journalism was evident on Twitter. Its users tweeted about periodicals like *Radio Times’* and *The Stage’s* extensive coverage of the *Hollow Crown* as well as linking to their own and others’ television blogs covering each of the series’ instalments at length, evidence of participatory fan culture described so well by Henry Jenkins (2003). Finally, although journalists sometimes opened their reviews with an acknowledgement of a programme’s location within a summer Shakespeare season and cultural olympiad, there was little cross-referencing of writing on other components belonging to the season or World Shakespeare Festival. In contrast, Twitter’s search engine’s display of related top tweets, latest tweets, and accounts & its users’ take-up of these functions, however, made it easy to find and participate in a festival body of commentary. Throughout this article, I cite Shakespeare Unlocked-related tweeting to consider how the season fulfils festival criteria: religiosity, concern with and production of history, celebrity and quality, rejuvenation, renewal, accessibility and participation.

**Religiosity**

Historically, a festival was a recurring period of celebration for religious reasons, dedicated to a prominent figure or event in that religion, ‘often involving a large and sumptuous meal, a feast’ with ‘a unique splendour’ (Verhoef 1995: 10-11). Theatre festivals internationally have been previously discussed as ‘akin to...religious ritual’ and even ‘compared to pilgrimages’ (Rowntree 2006: 13, Frey 2000). Fernie foregrounds the way in which ‘Goethe was concerned to hail the Bard with something like religious awe’ on his Shakespeare’s Day, Main, Germany on 14 October 1771 (Fernie 2017: 149). The analogy can be extended to television, despite the fact that BBC Shakespeare seasons are not an annual feast but sporadically and strategically recurrent, often in the lead up to charter renewal (usually occurring once a decade) and other moments which debate the corporation’s value. *Shakespeare Unlocked* has many elements in common with ‘festival’ as defined in religious terms: its identification of one man, his work, and that of his ‘disciples’ (household-name directors, actors, scholars) as a focal point; the volume and intended splendour of its components; as well as the presence of quasi-devotional attitudes towards the season’s key figures from its creators and audiences. The season was designed to honour Shakespeare as a key icon of English and global culture, in order to complement the London 2012 Olympic celebrations, including, the World Shakespeare Festival, described by one commentator as an act of ‘veneration’ (Sullivan 2013: 8). Tweets such as @Soc\_of\_Authors, the account of the UK trade union for writers, illustrators and literary translators – recognise this: ‘BBC launches 4 month long focus on Shakespeare #ShakespeareUnlocked in association with @RSC @britishmuseum @WSF2012’. Venerating Shakespeare concurrently facilitates lauding other renowned institutions, such as the nation’s leading public service broadcaster and monarchy. Out of Shakespeare’s thirty-seven plays, the BBC chose to film almost half of his histories of English kings for the season: *Richard II, Henry IV* parts 1 and 2, and *Henry V* made up a four-part mini-series titled the *Hollow Crown* (the first tetralogy, made up of the three *Henry VIs* and *Richard III,* followed in 2016).[[13]](#endnote-13) The main image chosen for the BBC’s *Shakespeare Unlocked* website was the actor Ben Whishaw representing Richard II. In this picture, he is resplendent in mediaeval costume and accessories, before a gold, halo-effect background. The image thus capitalises on and plays with the cultivated proximity of images of monarchs in the period to iconography of Christian martyrs and saints, to promise viewers a quasi-religious, ecstatic experience along the lines of ancient festivals.

Response to the *Hollow Crown* on Twitter saw fans responding in devotional ways towards English actors (‘home-grown talent’ in the parlance of television journalists that year) who have become international phenomena through their work in popular franchises such as Marvel Cinematic Universe (Hiddleston) and James Bond films. Matthew Hills has demonstrated a ‘neoreligiosity’ in fan cultures, with ‘discourses of religion’ which fans appropriate (Hills 2003: 86). The hashtag #SundayShakespeare – originating that year to encourage and corral tweeted Shakespeare quotations on a particular theme on Sundays each week (sometimes with a *Hollow Crown* theme, leading to many tweets’ inclusion of series actors’ names and the account name @HollowCrownFans) – resembles a digital incarnation of the Sunday Shakespeare Society. The society, which meets for monthly readings at a pub in the heart of London’s theatreland, was founded in 1874 by Dr F.J. Furnivall to enable its members to use their Sabbath leisure time for the study of Shakespeare (an activity later echoed in the BBC founder Lord Reith’s broadcasting of Shakespeare on Sundays). In this usage, ‘fans’ is an abbreviation of ‘fanatics’, defined as people brimful of excessive and single-minded zeal, originally for an extreme religious cause. Twitter’s own terminology includes that of ‘followers’ and ‘following’ to describe users’ relationships and activities. One Hiddleston fan account tweeting throughout Shakespeare Unlocked has @HiddlesArmy as their handle: a name that resonates with Christian discourse of angels as an army with God as their leader, especially the Salvation Army. Some tweets boasted (occasionally in a tongue-in-cheek, self-mocking way) of devotional behaviours and ecstasy that only the faithful get and non-believers find weird or bemusing: Avenger’s fan ‘@bubblegumtef:[[14]](#endnote-14) Just saw an advert for #shakespeareunlocked I actually squealed at the sight of @twhiddleston Mum gave me the weirdest look ever ...’ and Shakespeare- and general book-lover, Whovian, Welsh patriot and ‘geek’ @totheWelshladys ‘got so excited at the BBC #shakespeareunlocked trailer that I did a little dance and farted #truestory’. One tweet’s content invokes the openings of the Bible’s Genesis and the Gospel of John as well as the title of a Punisher comic in the Marvel MAX series, which features the character Loki, portrayed on film by Hiddleston: ‘@annazinovieva:[[15]](#endnote-15) Guess who [stuck out tongue, closed eyes emoji] In the beginning [victory sign emoji] #hiddleston #henryV #tom #drawing #pencil #2012 #thehollowcrown http://instagr.am/p/ N8\_lQCNaUn/’. To unpack this tweet, the emoji is sometimes used to signify extreme distaste with the subject in hand (sometimes referred to as ‘poison control emoji’), but is also used to express emotions like silly, playful and ecstatic – an meaning that seems more likely in the context of the whole message. Meanwhile, belonging to and participation in a Hiddleston fan community through fan art is suggested by the terms ‘pencil’ and ‘drawing’, suggesting their sketching of his image from the programme (an Instagram link perhaps providing the image is now broken). Other tweets comment on screengrabs of the actor from the series that are determined to be iconic. Many worship specific, mundane, not stereotypically sexual, body parts as though they were holy relics: @lokiismycopilot, a television producer based in San Francisco, LA and London, whose account name references Hiddleston’s Marvel character, wrote, ‘OMG [Oh My God] THAT SMILE’; ‘@lokiismycopilot #cheekbonage’, ‘@lokiismycopilot #THAT JAWLINE’; and Ottawa-based @AdrienneTaylor exclaimed, ‘That face [heart emoji]’.

Tweets by @alexwilcox[[16]](#endnote-16) and @\_Caufoot upbraided the BBC for acts of sacrilegious disrespect including their unwillingness to fund the entire The Hollow Crown project in the first place, then issues with its broadcasting quality, scheduling and re-scheduling. The episode of *Shakespeare Unlocked* which saw Ethan Hawke expounding on actors approaching the role – involving handling a First Folio – inspired a devotional fervour for and against this ‘preacher’. 1623 theatre company’s director Ben Spiller (@shakespiller) tweeted that he was ‘Moved to tears by Ethan Hawke as he leafed his way through the First Folio #shakespeareunlocked #bbc’. Meanwhile, Shakespeare scholar Peter Kirwan (@DrPeterKirwan) was moved to anger at the presenter’s physical lack of reverence for this holy tome: ‘[Ethan] Hawke! Get your greasy fingers OFF that first folio! Where are your archivists gloves? #shakespeareunlocked’. These two experts’ rather different responses to the Hawke sequence also evidenced these programmes being a springboard for professional conversation and debate among an online community of viewers. Arguably, such interactions might enable the BBC ‘to harvest external knowledge, resources and talent’ to rejuvenate future programming, another criterion for festival and Habermasian obligation of public service broadcasting (Craik 2006: 55). The perpetuation of the season’s devotional overtones on Twitter was enabled by the plurality of the deities Shakespeare Unlocked was seen to serve: not just the grand institutions of the British monarchy, the bard and the BBC but also a popularly appointed elect of actors and objects. Additionally, the *Hollow Crown* fervour demonstrated a commercial aspect to this ostensibly free-to-air festival – an aspect identified as inherent in large-scale religious events – with tweets testifying to the purchase of, and urging other followers internationally to buy, the DVD box set of or magazine issues devoted to the series (Rowntree 2006: 13, Frey 2000).

**History**

Linnemann and Prescott have written of festival’s celebratory ‘affective frame’ (Linnemann 2010: 239, Prescott 2015: 14). That festivals tend to celebrate some kind of history is a logical consequence of their roots in marking pivotal moments in the development of a religion. Bridget Escolme has written of the iconographies of pastness in different cultural traditions evident in the 2012 Globe to Globe Festival, which – along with Shakespeare Unlocked – was part of the London Cultural Olympiad (Escolme 2013: 309). The season recognises and builds on past, albeit secular, events familiar to patriots, bardolators, Hiddlestoners and BBC viewers. These include English military victories (Agincourt); the lives of famous monarchs and writers; acting careers; and the BBC’s coverage of nationally-significant events (the Cultural Olympiad). Shakespeare Unlockeddid little to combat critics perceptions of the BBC’s obsession with its own and the nation’s history (see Williams 2015 and Moran 2014). Shakespeare’s historicity and reputation as ‘the world’s greatest playwright nearly 400 years after his death’ were phenomena that the season’s commissioning editor Mark Bell repeatedly said the BBC wanted to explore throughout the season and which its documentary presenters duly explained within the programmes. A BBC webpage on *Simon Schama’s Shakespeare,* linked to in a tweet by a London-based media and arts PR consultancy @tpr\_media\_PR, quotes the presenter as saying ‘to understand Shakespeare we must appreciate how he was of his time’ (Anon. 2012a). Despite engaging with new(er) methods and technologies, such as filmed theatre productions and High Definition television for the broadcasts, the season’s contents foregrounded both Shakespeare’s historicity and that of the theatre companies he inspired. This was often the focus of Shakespeare Unlocked’s cross-institutional collaborations: the British Museum tweeted ahead of one episode of *Shakespeare’s Restless World* that it would explore the impact of the plague on London. Early modern material culture was prominently paraded and approximated: centuries-old physical objects were described by the camera lens and presenters’ commentary in the season’s documentaries while lavish medieval costumes were splashed across television screens in the *Hollow Crown*. Personal histories were the subject of *My Own Shakespeare,* which featured celebrities recounting a treasured encounter with a passage from Shakespeare and its impact on their lives. Even the programmes focused around the latter day work of the RSC – *Shakespeare Unlocked, Shakespeare Uncovered, Off By Heart: Shakespeare*, and *Julius Caesar* – exuded a sense of its historical achievements as the forge of great Shakespearean actors and directors, of celebrated and landmark productions – including the all Afro-British cast Roman history play, which was commonly touted as the first ‘all black’ or ‘African’ *Julius Caesar* in media coverage and social media reception of the broadcast (Billington, Cole, Mulhern). Through its inclusion of this production, the season not only celebrated the history of previous centuries but also simultaneously enacted and celebrated the ‘history in the making’ of London’s 2012 sporting and Cultural Olympiads (to which the stage production, via the World Shakespeare Festival, belonged). Writing of the World Shakespeare Festival, Paul Edmondson described something which seeks ‘to etch [some memory] into the cultural consciousness’, recognizing a festive desire for historical longevity, even ‘legacy’ – a word much-used in discussion of the predicted and actual aftermath of the London Olympics (Edmondson 268). In this way, the season gestured not just towards ancient festivals, but those that have *made* history: in popular musical memory, examples would be the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, when Dylan went electric, or counterculture’s highpoint, the 1969 Woodstock Festival.

Twitter users readily bought into and perpetuated the season’s celebration of history. Tweets spread images of the *Hollow Crown* actors in medieval costume from marketing materials and screen captures: Hiddleston as Henry V surrounded by vast St George’s flags, Irons as Henry IV in crown & furs, Rory Kinnear (Bolingbroke) and Ben Whishaw (Richard II) clasping their ermine robes and scepters. A photograph of James Shapiro inside Shakespeare’s Globe surfaced in several tweets, as did an early modern map from the *Restless World* series. Tweets readily identified *The Hollow Crown* plays as belonging to the Shakespearean genre of ‘histories’ and documentaries as concerning Jacobean history. Meanwhile, Shakespeare professionals tweeted critiques of the season’s handling of history: @DrPeterKirwan and theatre director @Shakespiller used their tweets to acknowledge, that while they were happy ‘to have a documentary about Jacobean Shakespeare’, they shared concerns about the accuracy of the accounts Schama and Shapiro were presenting (@Shakespiller). Sending up history was only just gestured at in tweets about the season using a promotional image of *QI* host, Stephen Fry, and his ‘Shakespeare special’ contestants dressed up in garish, pantomime, Jacobethan garb. There were a few such institutionally sanctioned and ritualized transgressions but little discernible of festival’s deliberate challenge to or inversion of dominant, grand narratives of historical social order (Linnemann 2010: 239, Picard and Robinson 2006: 13-14). Overall, celebrating history was undertaken by Shakespeare Unlocked’s makers and viewers (at least those traceable on Twitter) with patriotic gravity and earnestness.

**Celebrity and quality**

Festivals have become as much about the star artists *involved* in paying tribute to a celebrated figure as that figure themselves. Often these stars’ contribution to their chosen art form has been sustained, approaching a life-time’s achievement[[17]](#endnote-17). Shakespeare Unlocked’s producers, like many festival organisers and producers of BBC Shakespeare before them, co-opted multiple celebrities – many with experience of performing the plays on stage – to amplify his fame and reputation, the excellence of his works, and the glory of the occasion. Unlike coverage of the BBC Shakespeare, which ‘did not dwell on the careers and personality of the actors’, the Corporation’s own magazine and viewing guide, *The Radio Times*, heralded *The Hollow Crown* with the epithet ‘Kings of cool: Classic Shakespeare with Britain’s biggest stars’ (Terris 1994: 206, Zoë Williams 2012). Searching Twitter suggests that the BBC was rewarded for its faith in the power of celebrity to secure organic, social media coverage of the season, especially *The Hollow Crown* series. Both Hiddleston and Jeremy Irons, playing regal roles, were spoken of by fans as ‘acting royalty’, fit for their roles because of their previous kingly or godly performances (by the playwright @lifelikeTheatre). Fans tweeted about the ‘starry’ cast, exclaiming ‘Have you SEEN the cast in THIS?’ and ‘can’t possibly fight [i.e. resist] this cast’ (@meekTatiHec, @kapil\_p, @mabomanji and @ahremsee).[[18]](#endnote-18) An indication of the potentially Shakespeare-eclipsing effect of Hiddleston can be seen in several tweets that use the excitement around his *Hollow Crown* roles to encourage people to vote for him (rather than the playwright) as international ‘man of 2012’. There are occasional apologies or flashes of irony from tweeters who wished to focus on the plays in writing about the series. For example, the Indian writer @Sridala flags that her substantial blog ‘post on Henry V [is] (Not so much about @twhiddleston)’. Hiddleston and Whishaw were the subject of sustained female fan gaze relating to *The Hollow Crown* which constructed value in ‘looking at’ the ‘hottest actors’ selected for the series (@melsboingboing) and making screen captures of them in the series and *Shakespeare Unlocked* to enable and prolong shared objectification and commentary, such as Ben Whishaw ‘looks hot in a crown’ (@GreatAuntUK, UK and Chicago-based tweeter of ‘aunt friendly ideas + news’). The actor and programme’s fame fed and thrived in these posts, and others by international fan accounts such as @HiddlesProductions, @Hiddleston\_Tom, @TomHiddlesNET, @LokisArmyBR, @LokisArmyGermany, @ItalianLokiArmy; @sherlockology and @bakerst\_girl for Benedict Cumberbatch; @DavidTennantBook and @tennant\_watch for David Tennant. Fan accounts dedicated to Shakespeare (i.e. not those representing professional Shakespeare organisations or individuals) were less prolific, but included @Alwaysiambic and @shakespearelogs.

Journalists covering the season’s programming identified, if not a dependence, a dynamic between Shakespeare, broadcaster and the celebrity-rich line-up in front of and behind the cameras. Witness Vicky Frost’s *Guardian* article, ‘Top British talent recruited for BBC’s Shakespeare history plays’:

It is more than 30 years since the BBC last screened a major cycle of Shakespeare's history plays. So it is little surprise that this summer’s four new films from the corporation have attracted the cream of British acting and directing talent – from Jeremy Irons and Ben Whishaw to Simon Russell Beale and Sir Richard Eyre. With the Oscar-winning director Sam Mendes as executive producer ... if the new history plays are well received, there are hopes that the BBC will commission further new Shakespeare.

Frost draws a straightforward causal connections between the heavyweight theatre and film celebrity involvement and appeal of the series, as did newspapers who interviewed David Suchet (Duke of York), Simon Russell Beale (Falstaff), Rory Kinnear (Bolingbroke), and Maxine Peake (Doll Tearsheet), feted for their live Shakespearean performances. Tom Hiddleston’s casting as Hal captured a sizeable share of media coverage, almost all invoking his Marvel Cinematic Universe role and resultant, strong fan-following, rather than his experience in performing early modern theatre with company’s such as Cheek by Jowl (Sullivan 2014a). The *Independent* dedicated an entire paragraph of its viewing guide to ‘the stars’ of *The Hollow Crown*:

Ben Whishaw is Richard II; the supporting cast only features Patrick Stewart, Rory Kinnear, David Suchet, David Morrissey, Clemence Poesy, Lindsay Duncan and James Purefoy... And the quality continues in the Henrys: Tom Hiddleston is Hal to Jeremy Irons's Henry IV, with Simon Russell Beale as – who else? – Falstaff, and Julie Walters as Mistress Quickly. And keep your eyes peeled for Michelle Dockery, Maxine Peake, Niamh Cusack, John Hurt, Iain Glen... (Holly Williams 2012).

Not all celebrities were viewed by commentators as equal, or equally likely to contribute to the quality of the output. Holly Williams proceeded to have a dig at *The Telegraph*, for being ‘most excited by the presence of Downton alumni: “*Downton Abbey* star Michelle Dockery is set to play another lady [Lady Percy] – this time as part of the BBC's Shakespeare season marking the 2012 London Olympics”’. Williams criticises her counterpart at the rival paper for foregrounding a junior actress in a vastly popular series, without a known Shakespeare pedigree, from among the ‘sackfuls of talent here’. Though, as she shies away from explaining what characteristics of Dockery’s acting are problematic, it looks as though her reservations are informed by cultural snobbery. Academic reviewers too objected to what they identified as the excesses of the casting department: ‘The rest of the cast is strong, albeit unnecessarily famous’ (Dockery is the writer’s chosen example), ‘No role goes unfilled by the usual suspects of big-budget British costume drama’ (Sharpe 2013: 239, 240). These critics suggest that the BBC’s over-use of celebrity actors indicates an unwarranted lack of trust in Shakespeare’s own celebrity and the quality of his own work. They imply a need for festivals to strike a balance between the relative statuses of their subject and the celebrants chosen to venerate them to ensure expectations around quality are met.

Lucy Mangan and Andrew Billen explore this delicate balance in their columns on *Shakespeare in Italy*. They acknowledge the magnetism and popular celebrity of *Shakespeare’s Italy* host Count Francesco da Mosto, architect, historian and television presenter. However, they also mock his presumption of expertise as well as his (mis)representing both Shakespeare and Italians to viewers, as ‘fabrication’, ‘unsubstantiated rumour’ ‘a dangerously smooth ride’, ‘absurd assertions’, ‘there is no evidence, no evidence at all...fact fades before the shining glory of the idea’ and ‘a butterfly programme, beautiful’. James Walton writes similarly dismissively that the programme ‘has nothing remotely convincing to say’ but ‘lyrical generalities, irresponsible speculation, wild guesswork’ (Walton 2012: 35). Ed Cumming also articulates the way in which, despite his celebrity credentials, da Mosto jeopardises rather than enhances this homage to Shakespeare’s most oft-imagined country and quality, public service broadcasting. In terms of the latter, he remarks:

BBC Two documentaries demand a lot more than charm’...approximately three minutes into the hour, da Mosto shipped his academic anchor, winked at the camera (or he may as well have done) and went on a jaunty sail through a raging ocean of Italian cliché. What had looked as though it might be an incisive literary travelogue instead ended up feeling more like a guided tour of the thoughts of a man lying in bed after a bottle of particularly thick Chianti

(Cumming 2012: 35).

For Cumming, Da Mosta’s celebrity and honorifics cannot compensate for his inexpertise, which distracts from and threatens to dishonour (the antithesis of festival’s intention) not only Shakespeare, but also BBC Two and the travelogue genre at large.

The cross-publication criticism of *Shakespeare and Italy* contrasts strongly with critical reception of another of the season’s documentary series: *Simon Schama’s Shakespeare*. Michael Pilgrim’s review praises the historian’s accuracy and knowledgeability in its title: ‘All hail the greatest scriptwriter of factual TV’. Within the review, he acknowledges that what the programme lacks in originality – arguably an inherent problem for festivals focused on a single artist’s legacy and constituted by frequent repetition of their works and reiteration of their life – it makes up for in calibre and style: ‘It’s been said before, but Schama said it better’ and ‘Can Simon Schama do no wrong? Probably not. A six-part exposition on cat food down the ages would be a joy in his hands’. For Pilgrim, this series strikes exactly the right balance between celebrity and quality. Another academic’s series, Shapiro’s *The King and The Playwright,* received similarly favourable coverage, focused on its presenter’s ability to negotiate celebrity status and quality content*.* One reviewer describes the way in which, although it starts out ‘feel[ing] like an outline for an academic thesis’, it has a perceivedly ‘scholarly’ quality that is key to its worth (Dugdale and Kinnes 2012: 61). In summary, celebrity and expertise in alignment are seen predominantly as doing justice to Shakespeare as the festival’s focus: witness in addition to the *Hollow Crown* ‘Oscar-winning’ director Sam Mendes and Shapiro (Frost, @JGGreenBay), the former *Good Life* star and actress Felicity Kendal – fronting a documentary on Shakespeare in India because of her credentials as the star and subject of the *Shakespeare Wallah* – Helen Mirren, Harriet Walter, and Derek Jacobi. Celebrity is not an absolute guarantee of quality. Celebrities benefit the season only when most critics and Twitter users perceive them to be unquestionably, aesthetically stunning or genuinely expert. In which case, they are sometimes figured as being in the service of Shakespeare’s fame, rendering him ‘this summer’s [TV] star’ (Billen 2012a: 11). Elsewhere, celebrities even compensated for Shakespeare’s flaws: issues of characterization and pace in the RSC *Julius Caesar* broadcast were identified as ‘the play’s problem’ (Billen 2012b: 16) and for Ben Lawrence ‘When this *Henry V* didn’t work, the fault lay with Shakespeare’. However, lapses in celebrity achievement or expertise were readily figured as undermining the innate calibre of Shakespeare.

Verhoef identifies festivals as marked by ‘the high quality of the performed work (both classical and experimental) and the pursuit of perfection’ so that the ‘total program of artistic performances…transcends the quality of everyday programming’ (Verhoef 1995: 10, see also Bennett and Carson 2013:12). That Shakespeare Unlocked ‘achieved a level of exceptional festivity’ mandated by festival theorists was undoubtedly aided by the BBC’s promotion of the season as a whole: ‘the combined force of a single season like this is greater than the sum of its parts and very exciting’ (BBC Arts Commissioning Editor, Mark Bell). Viewers writing in to the ‘You Say’ section of *Sunday Times Culture* lauded the series and season as ‘perfection’, a ‘joy to watch’, ‘brilliant’, magnificent’ and making ‘telly…worth watching again’ (Anon. 2012b)*.* Television critics also appeared to concur with and deploy festival theorist and practitioners’ criterion for a quality *total* by referring to series’ and season’s ambition, their ‘general’ and ‘overall achievement’, the ‘impressive’ ‘cumulative effect’ (Davies 2012, Hoyle 2012). For example, they identified several of the season’s broadcasts as best of the year, on-screen victories, confounding low expectations, and turning the tide of television Shakespeare. Indeed, Lister declared it ‘probably the best televised Shakespeare there has ever been’ (Lister 2012: 3). In this way, Shakespeare Unlocked fulfils Arts Council England’s definition of successful festivals as having an ethos ‘based on exceeding expectation’.

**Rejuvenation and renewal**

Alessandro Falassi’s vision of a crucial role for festivals – in the way that they ‘renounce and then announce culture, renew periodically the lifestream of a community by creating new energy and giving sanction to its institutions’ – continues to influence work on Shakespearean festivals (Falassi 1987: 3). Fernie describes Garrick’s Stratford Jubilee as celebrating Shakespeare ‘less as literary heritage than as an example and inspiration for new creative work’ (Fernie 2017: 150). Linnemann traces the way in which reaffirmation of authority after working through tensions about the cultural value of Shakespeare inheres in such festivals and enables the rejuvenation and remaking, not only of his works, but also of the organisations that produce and host them – in reputation and actuality (Linnemann 2010: 241, 235). Shakespeare Unlocked most fulfils the festival criteria for collaborative rejuvenation and renewal seemingly universal to twenty-first century festival policy and criticism when experimenting with the hybrid experiences digital technology could bring to television from the theatre: particularly playing with liveness and its sometime equation with superiority, something that older definitions of festival take for granted but which has excited and exercised those involved in modern festivals (Arts Council England 2003, Craik 2006: 54-55, Linnemann 2010: 241, Conekin 2003: 4).[[19]](#endnote-19) Shakespeare Unlocked collaborated with the media production company Illuminations (who produce Shakespeare Live cinema screenings) and the RSC on a performance film of *Julius Caesar*. The RSC is no stranger to experimentation with convergence between the live arts and their recorded counterparts, incorporating audio-visual media into live performances, naturalistic acting styles from television drama, not to mention using stars known from television drama (Auslander 2008: 41, Sullivan 2014b). Patrick Mulhern, admittedly writing in the BBC’s own *Radio Times* magazine, lit on *Julius Caesar* as a ‘first’ in terms of timing and casting: ‘We’re used to seeing filmed versions of theatre shows long after the *final* final curtain but, in what must be a first, this RSC production only opened this month in Stratford upon Avon’ and described the ‘all black cast’ as a ‘welcome break from tradition’ (Mulhern 2012: 627). One feature of the broadcast was that ‘those parts of the play that occur in a public space are filmed in the public space of the theatre’ during a performance with a live audience, while ‘the play’s interior scenes were filmed in a disused Chinese marker in Colindale, north London, in April…the two [are] spliced together [to] make a feature film’ (Sutcliffe 2012: 38, Caesar 2012: 6-7). Sutcliffe was ambivalent about the relationship between innovation and quality in the film: ‘acknowledging the audience who were there on the night unavoidably means excluding the audience watching at home. Not completely, obviously, but there’s an unmistakable, unshiftable sense of being secondary to the event…On television, we don’t just want the best seat in the house, we want to feel we’ve got the only seat in the house’ (Sutcliffe 2012: 38). He declares the sound muddier, shots messier in these scenes and warns readers that ‘there are hazards to the sudden intimacy [of the television cameras]; not all the actors had adjusted the projection of their performance to the closeness of the camera’ (Sutcliffe 2012: 38). However, he welcomed the film as ‘alive in a way that a recorded stage performance never can be’ (Sutcliffe 2012: 38). Additionally, critics identified *The Hollow Crown* as a vehicle for some young actors’ career breaks and an occasion to crack out some expensive, top-notch, filming-on-location technologies, more usually deployed in the cinema. Other reviewers displayed some inner conflict about the level of innovation involved in parts of the season. For example, Neil MacGregor’s Radio 4 series was described both as likely to ‘transform our view of Shakespeare’ and as having the same thesis, that ‘the museum is actually about the object that lets you get into somebody else’s life’, as his previous series for the same station, *The World in a Hundred Objects* (Crompton 2012: 4-5). Twitter was quieter still on rejuvenation and renewal in the season, perhaps because of the site’s preoccupation with moments (snapshots of the present or past) or because fans enjoy a degree of repetition and familiarity. Innovation appears to be of greater concern to festival theorists and funders than social media users in their respective commentary.

**Accessibility and participation**

Festivals over the centuries have differed widely in terms of accessibility. Some are exclusive events by virtue of their cost, length and locations, ‘encapsulating and isolating culture, shielding it from wider audiences’ (Willems cited in Iordanova 2013:1). Others, such as the Shakespearean Globe to Globe Festival, which emphasised its inclusivity, especially its success in attracting local black and Asian minority ethnic populations through targeted marketing and communication, have a clear remit to gain new audiences (Bennett and Carson 2013: 3, 8). It is the latter model of accessibility that Fernie has in mind when writing of the Bakhtinian credentials of Garrick’s jubilee, which ‘took Shakespeare to the people…to the streets’ of rural Warwickshire (Fernie 2017: 119). Similarly, Sullivan welcomes the wide regional reach of events the Royal Shakespeare Company’s curated throughout Great Britain in 2012 (Sullivan 2013: 8). To give a sense of the season’s audiences, of the extent to which it was accessed at the time of broadcast, the average viewing figures for the *Hollow Crown* (the most primetime, heavily advertised and popular element of the season) were 700 000 viewers out of a possible 57.5 million or 1.2 per cent of UK television viewers (Anon. 2016a). The Olympic ceremonies gained audiences of 24 million, Downton Abbey had 12 million viewers, various weekend reality television shows 11 million (Anon. 2012c). The adaptations’ immediate viewing figures were arguably comparable to the number of students studying Shakespeare in UK schools in that year, print copies of the UK’s best-selling book sold (decidedly not Shakespeare: Dan Brown or Alex Ferguson topped charts in recent years), tickets sold to the Edinburgh Fringe (somewhat over half a million in recent years). Other components in the season were much less popular, more readily comparable with other BBC infotainment programming.

Shakespeare Unlocked was broadcast on the free-to-air BBC’s television channels, radio stations and catch-up services such as iPlayer. Commenting on the accessibility of the broadcasts’ intended scheduling, Holly Williams voiced approval that the *Hollow Crown*’s ‘slot on BBC2, not the outer regions of BBC4, should mean a decent audience tuning in for what could have been billed as niche’ (Holly Williams 2012).[[20]](#endnote-20) The rival *Telegraph* likewise commended the ‘prime-time screenings in a slot where the viewing public are more used to finding talent shows’ (Davies 2012: 33). Parts of the season were shown on outdoor public screens and in cinemas around the country, creating some physically- and temporally-proximate collective viewing communities. Reminiscing about the year’s Shakespeare celebrations, @thelifeof\_rose tweeted pictures of two cinema tickets for a screening of *Henry IV* at the British Film Institute on 2 July, with a caption mentioning two fellow attendees: ‘**Bard highlight** of 2012 inc [@BFI](https://twitter.com/BFI) screening of [#thehollowcrown](https://twitter.com/hashtag/thehollowcrown?src=hash) HenryIV With [@BakerSt\_girl](https://twitter.com/BakerSt_girl) & [@Wilidrine](https://twitter.com/Wilidrine) [#shakespeareSunday](https://twitter.com/hashtag/shakespeareSunday?src=hash)’. Other viewing communities for the season have been more geographically and temporally dispersed: it has since aired on public service broadcasting channels overseas, such as PBS in America and SBS in Australia, been consumed by international audiences on DVDs as well as on illegal download sites.

While it is outside the scope of this article to evaluate the accessibility of the productions’ content, commentators in print media did note attempts by the BBC to make Shakespeare broadly accessible in terms of content as well as distribution: cutting characters for clarity over genealogy in *Richard II* (Orford 2013: 236); confining the length of plays broadcast within the realm of feature film duration; choosing three directors for the *Hollow Crown* who were ‘preoccupied with accessibility’ (Davies 2012: 33); doing *Shakespeare in Italy* ‘with a colourful travelogue feel, …the emphasis firmly on Shakespeare as a popular entertainer, ….a warmly accessible approach’ and ‘[*Caesar*] on the level of thriller’ (Hogan 2012: 57). Sam Wollaston argued self-deprecatingly that ‘If I [a Shakespeare-dreading television and motoring journalist] got something out of this gritty, grimy *Julius Caesar*, then anyone can’ (Wollaston 2012: 21). As discussed in the previous section, on Twitter, the celebrity cast and their aesthetically-pleasing appearances were proclaimed by fans to make *The Hollow Crown* not just accessible but irresistible viewing.

Except for the BBC’s inclusion of participating schoolchildren in some of the programmes and a studio audience for *QI,* the season did not achieve Linnemann’s definition of Shakespearean festivals, informed by Bakhtin and Falassi, as ‘utopian events where the barrier between performer and spectator is collapsed’ (Linnemann 2010: 240), nor Muir’s of an event where ‘the physical bodies of the actors’ are proximate ‘along with the sensory stimuli of sharing the same space and air’ (Muir 2015: 151, 153). However, audiences were given unparalleled televisual access to Shakespearean performers in the process of creating and reflecting on their work: there were hours of interview footage and recordings in *Off By Heart: Shakespeare; Macbeth, the movie star and me; The King and the Playwright*; *Felicity Kendal’s Indian Shakespeare Quest;* and *Shakespeare Unlocked.* Tweeting viewers broke out of the passive position of being occasionally alluded to by professional theatre and television critics into active social and cultural roles, producing their own critical and creative anticipations and responses and circulating others’ (Prescott 2013: 157, 183). See the section on celebrity above regarding, for instance, fan art. See discussion of the false divide between ‘digital’ and ‘real-life’ or ‘analogue’ Shakespeare productions, experiences and communities subscribed to throughout this article in the Peter Holland’s chapter of virtual communities and the conclusion of *Shakespeare and the* *Digital World* as well as Jean Burgess and Joshua Green’s outlining of a continuum of cultural participation which includes understanding ‘all those who upload, view, comment on or create content as participants’ (O’Neill 2014: 29).

If they did not ‘make friends’, as Muir writes of audiences at the Cambridge Shakespeare Festival doing, they did converse with other viewers, sometimes beyond the immediate broadcast period (Muir 2015: 151). For example, @HMStack had only mentioned @exitthelemming once in 2010, before they exchanged tweets about *Off By Heart: Shakespeare* in 2012. Over the next four years, they tweeted each other every few months. [@Catriona\_Cullen](https://twitter.com/Catriona_Cullen) (no profile information) and author @daisygoodwinuk corresponded in commendation of the same show. Twitter conversations were had anticipating the season’s trailers, complaining about rescheduling of programmes, posting screenshots of actors to other individual users or fan accounts, commending writing on the season (the National Trust bookshop, @NTbookshop, tweeted the *Financial Times’* arts and culture section,@FTlifeandstyle, in this way), promoting the work of your boss/academic mentor (@DrDustagheer on @DrFarahKC’s contribution to the season), and discussing the adaptive practices of the season’s radio plays (@derbyscene, @derbyindies, @MisAchievement). Conversations were also speculatively sought. Liverpool/London-based filmmaker and blogger @CharlieGranby invited Tom Hiddleston (via his official account) to read her review: ‘Hi Tom! I’ve reviewed #TheHollowCrown, Henry IV, Part One – I thought you were fantastic as Prince Hal’. Others were more casual in inviting responses by mentioning (including the Twitter handle of) producers of and contributors to the season in the body of their tweets: @RSC, @britishmuseum, @WSF2012, @bbcradio3, @bbcradio4, @BBCLearning, @stanley\_wells (*Shakespeare in Love*) and @TheJeremyPaxman (*Off By Heart: Shakespeare*). Indeed, such mentions may be motivated by a wish to draw the attention of and reaction from those accounts’ followers as much as that of the individual or organisation mentioned. The fan accounts mentioning each other cited in previous sections are evidence of the season’s audiences ‘collaboratively engaging as a member of a crowd that is physically responding to real people acting the parts’, though his conclusion of the sentence ‘right in front of you’ is not intended to stretch to the screens of electronic devices cozied up to; nor physical response to encompass drawing fan art, keyboarding your lustful response onto social media, retweeting a post you like; nor crowd to mean people gathered together online (Muir 150). Twitter interactions continued across time and space as parts of the season were disseminated across the globe, extending the season’s fulfilment of festival theorists’ criteria for the formation and maintenance of international communities of makers and audiences beyond the series’ production uniting an international cast and crew[[21]](#endnote-21) (Rowntree 2006: 16). Twitter is one social media platform: other work might explore the season and its viewing communities on Tumblr, YouTube, Pinterest and Instagram for evidence of festival participation. Having demonstrated the way in which viewers’ social media interactions overcome one possible challenge to seeing Shakespeare Unlocked as fulfilling the criteria for a festival, I move on to consider two further potential sticking points below: place and time.

**Place and time: challenges to Shakespeare Unlocked as festival?**

‘Festival’ is frequently defined as an organized series of concerts, plays, or films, typically held periodically in the same geographical place. That place often gives its name to the festival: think Glastonbury, Edinburgh or Cannes. Understanding Shakespeare Unlocked as a festival using this criterion is complicated by the fact that common usage of ‘the BBC’ refers not to a concrete place in London, Manchester or elsewhere in the UK, but multiple, non-physical platforms: various BBC television channels, radio stations, its websites and apps. These might be understood as Shakespeare Unlocked’s different stages: its Pyramid, Other and John Peel.[[22]](#endnote-22) Perhaps to compensate for this, the BBC often uses a discourse that constructs it as a place, titling community education resources *Open Space*, *Open Door, Open Air,* and the *Learning Zone.* Shakespeare Unlocked’s producers corralled the programmes using interstitials in television and radio broadcasting, and hyperlinks on its website, demonstrating a clear sense of BBC channels and websites as a unified and unifying place for Shakespeare Unlocked to be held. Its publicity proposed a *home*coming of British audiences to the nation’s first television broadcaster for Olympic coverage, from other free-to-air and paid-for channels. Some of Shakespeare Unlocked’s twitter audiences likewise figured the BBC as ‘place’, using expressions such as ‘the BBC is the place for’ or ‘no place for’ a type or specific piece of content. A parallel can thus be drawn between the BBC’s marketing in 2012 and the emphasis on location (and location tourism) evident in traditional festivals where the ‘concentrated time-space frame of the festival helped to make visible’ the life of places ‘that while rich in historic and architectural significance, often lacked animation’ (Picard and Robinson 2006: 1). While not tantamount to enclosing ‘open spots’, tweeters of the season created identifiable pockets of festivity within them. For instance, @PoetintheCity, the account of a Brooklyn- and UK-based poetry event producer, sought to locate a community of Shakespeare Unlocked viewers using hashtags and twitter handles and encouraged them to meet not just in digital but physical spaces – in this case, a live Shakespeare sonnets event.

However, traditional festival theory argues that a characteristic of festivals is the limited accessibility and exclusivity of their location. Many festival theorists share a conviction that ‘venue...is an important contributing factor to the atmosphere’, to the extent that venues must be bounded, rendered temporarily (at least) exclusive: ‘festivals seize on open spots and playfully enclose them’ (Verhoef 1995: 12). At one end of the continuum, these theorists perhaps have in mind the rather ‘unplayful’, towering metal fences and professional security guards deployed at paid-for festivals in rural and urban landscapes (occasionally breached by those who gatecrash, use fraudulent tickets, capture and share performances with those not physically presence, not to mention increasingly common, authorised radio and television broadcasts from festival sites); at the other, the temporary dressing and closure of streets to traffic for a mardi gras parade, signalling and securing the official route for participants and spectators. The possibility of Shakespeare Unlocked fitting Verhoef’s criterion for festival as an exclusive and *enclosed* space is fundamentally diminished by its status as a nationwide, free-to-air, public service broadcast, into homes, commercial and public venues, indeed any location where a viewer could access a television, radio, or mobile signal or an internet connection, around the United Kingdom (and arguably beyond the Union through its news and world service channels). Shakespeare Unlocked’s audiences were never physically enclosed in one location nor were there any limits on the numbers participating, beyond that which the national grid and internet servers could bear. Indeed, the desirability of the season being exclusive and enclosed was explicitly renounced by the BBC’s titling of the season, which declares an intention to free Shakespeare from bonds, possession and render him open to all. Even if an exclusive and enclosed place had been desired for Shakespeare Unlocked, popular wisdom holds that virtual space is much harder to enclose and police than its physical counterpart: witness the moral panic evident in the media concerning the internet as a space for producing and consuming illegal pornography, planning acts of terrorism and stealing money and identities. The digital challenge to enclosure seems to be evidenced by the seepage of Shakespeare Unlocked content, reception and activity away from official BBC sites by other audience members: many of its components, or fragments thereof (video clips, GIFs and stills), quickly became available on YouTube, Tumblr, Vimeo and Twitter. Hashtags aim to expand rather than enclose content or users, unlike the physical authorisation and entry tags worn by performers and festival goers (although, like festival wristbands, they may confer status and appeal onto the subject and author of the tweets). In short, Shakespeare Unlocked may not fulfil the traditional criterion for a physical, enclosed, exclusive, festival location, but technological advances acknowledged by more recent festival theory suggest this criterion is under review.

Just as festivals have traditionally been defined as occurring in a concentrated, delimited space, they are often defined as occurring in a concentrated, delimited period of time (Picard and Robinson 2006: 1). Many tweets articulated a sense of Shakespeare Unlocked as a restricted, festival period, particularly ‘ahead of the 2012 games’. Falassi constructs place, ‘claimed for collective festival activity’, and time (where temporal norms and routines are ‘disrupted and suspended’ for/motivated by the festival’s restricted duration), along with the intensification of special activities (‘such as prayers, performances, or feasts not typically a part of daily life’) as a trinity of essential festival ingredients, whose combination results in the modification of normal life, a ‘time out of time’ or ‘special temporal dimension’ (Linnemann 2010: 246, Frey 2000). This festival temporality was felt by those who tweeted of the exceptional ‘Shakespeare primetime’ in 2012, its representing ‘proper Friday night telly’*,* and those who hotly heralded its ‘commence’ or ‘start’. Most of the tweets about Shakespeare Unlocked concerning time direct users’ attention to individual elements occurring in the immediate future (‘Wednesday’, ‘tomorrow night’, ‘TONIGHT!’ and ‘now’), often accompanied by expressions of positive anticipation and a pleasurable impatience (‘excited’ and ‘can’t wait’ were recurrent). However, a number of users placed an emphasis on the exceptional impact of Shakespeare Unlocked’s multi-part offerings on their routine: young adult author @AHintofMystery wrote, of her *Hollow Crown* viewing, that ‘for the next 4 Saturdays at 9pm I’m exceedingly busy’.

More difficult for my attempt to define Shakespeare Unlocked as festival is that popular definitions of the term usually involve the event’s recurrence: a yearly, biannual or triennial activity (Rowntree 2006: 15-16, Craik 2006: 54). The BBC’s Shakespeare seasons occur rather sporadically, recently perhaps twice a decade, and always under a different name. I found no viewers and only a handful of critics who connected Shakespeare Unlocked to previous BBC Shakespeare seasons: it was not readily viewed as recurrent. Another challenge is that while the season was officially, temporally bounded by the BBC as occurring from March to June 2012, recording and streaming technologies meant that the festival content and scheduling could be experienced weeks, months and years later (with viewers determining how much or little to preserve the sequencing and spacing out of the original scheduling). These facilities disrupt the specificity and boundedness of festival time stressed in theories such as Bakhtin’s carnival (which emphasizes the break in time between ‘real’ and ‘festive’) and Falassi’s ‘time out of time’ which have been influential on attempts to delineate the characteristics of Shakespeare festivals[[23]](#endnote-23). They potentially allow festival consumers to produce ‘a more mundane experience of “time *within* time” – that is, an only partially festive experience mixed into the normal...rhythms of daily life’, in a digital environment which makes time and its passage increasingly visible by positioning clocks and timers in various and multiple locations on our appliances and screens (Linnemann 2010: 264, Grainge 2011: 132). Technology also allows people to binge-consume the festival – producing ‘hyper-’ or ‘super-concentrated’ ‘time out of time’. Use of such technologies by viewers means that Shakespeare Unlocked’s production, rather than its reception, uniformly fits definitions of festivals as having a ‘unique splendour which can only be maintained for a limited period of time’ or stylistic unity maintained ‘over a short space of time*...*because [technology], taste and fashion do not radically change’ (Verhoef 1995: 10, Willis 1991: 55). Despite resisting the alleged relinquishing of control of one’s time and scheduling to festival directors that Falassi sees as characteristic of festival, the temporal possibilities of digital technologies, to extend reception through time and across geographical space, have been perceived to actively enable certain festivals. The World Shakespeare Festivals’ Director Deborah Shaw argued in 2012 that ‘we could never have created a festival like this even five years ago, we simply didn’t have the digital tools to have kept the conversation going’ (Aspden 2012). Social media enables a sense of community among viewers that is not definitively dependent on synchronous experience. As with place, technological innovations have not necessarily introduced utterly new types of time-management and temporal experience to Shakespeare festival consumers. Rather, they have exaggerated existing ones.

**Conclusion: Shakespearean convergence cultures**

BBC Shakespeare Unlocked meets the criteria for a festival in terms of its quasi-religiosity, concern with and production of history, celebrity and quality, to some extent rejuvenation and renewal, as well as accessibility and participation. The latter was made possible for the first time in the BBC’s long history of creating Shakespeare seasons by the advent of social media the and considerable take-up of platforms such as Twitter by a diverse constituency of viewers, as part of their viewing practices. The traditionally-defined festival qualities that Shakespeare Unlocked relates to problematically – place and time – are undergoing redefinition in festival literature as the affordances of digital technology expand and cultural commentators question assumptions that equate digital experience with inferiority (Sulllivan 2014b, Auslander 2008). The redefinition of these criteria has been welcomed, applied and furthered by festival producers and practitioners. A significant example of this is the BBC’s explicit claim of a fit between their offerings and definitions of festival when they announced the title of their subsequent season, to mark the writer’s 400th anniversary of death in 2016, as ‘Shakespeare Festival’. It is a title which suggests that an apotheosis has been reached in terms of the synergy between the BBC, its Shakespeare output and notions of festival. Future research might explore just how well ‘Shakespeare Festival’ fulfils its onomastic promise in relation to its predecessor, Shakespeare Unlocked, evolving festival criteria, technological possibilities and the globalization of culture. The more extensive convergence between theatrical and televisual festivals since Shakespeare Unlocked, enabled by social media, necessitates publications and festivals themselves eschewing subordinate constructions of television festivals as components of or ancillary to their theatrical counterparts (elucidated in Edmondson et al 2013, Prescott and Sullivan 2015). Rather, the relationship will have to be remodelled in terms of a more equal collaboration or, even, competition.

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1. I italicise the series only throughout to avoid confusion. The phrase used without italics indicates the season as a whole. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *A Year of Shakespeare* foregrounds a festival as something with an ‘enormously wide variety’ or ‘diverse array’ of elements (in the case of the World Shakespeare Festival, a variety of languages and nationalities); includes reviews of plays, operas, dramatic recitals, musicals, television programmes, a museum exhibition; and mentions a symposium within the volume (Wells 2013: xxiii; Sullivan 2013: 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Earlier authors, such as Henry Jenkins, had to organize opportunities to observe and interview viewers, or to ask viewers to keep diaries of their thoughts (2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I offer some information on the identity projected by the Twitter user wherever possible. However, some Twitter accounts were deleted or made private during the course of this research. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. It was a stand-alone programme in this series, although it built on a previous programme’s format – *Off By Heart: Poetry*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The British Museum’s Director, Neil McGregor, had previously fronted *A History of Britain in a Hundred Objects* and authored a book of the same name. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. @exitthelemming (actor and director Samuel West), @shakespiller (Artistic Director of 1623 Ben Spiller), @Illuminations (producers of RSC in cinemas), @pendleyshakespeare (amateur open-air Shakespeare), @SGCNZ (Shakespeare’s Globe Centre New Zealand), @CivilianTheatre, @JeanieOOHare (NY theatre director, formerly RSC), @ShakespeareinLA (a resource for LA Shakespeare enthusiasts), @shakespearelogs and @Alwaysiambic (similar but without geographic specificity), @sylvmorris1 (independent researcher, Shakespeare blogger and archivist), @DrPeterKirwan (Nottingham), @ProfShakespeare (Grace Iopollo, Reading), @julie\_raby (York St John), @TaraHamling (Birmingham), @DrDustagheer (then KCL, now Kent), @shakespeareprof (Emily Sloan-Pace, California), @PaulBudra (Simon Fraser), @DavidjHendy (Sussex), and @AlxButterworth (KCL), @jordan\_welshy, @CSupiot, @Cassius614, @Jeremort and @simonleake. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. @tes, @teachingdrama, @SSF\_UK, @eslreading, @foreignstudents, @Debsgf, @Gwenelope, @laurenevans87, and @GSdrama. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. @shafLdn, ,@MsNiftyThrifty, @laurabrander, @nickyreyndoldsatw, @EmmaD73, @victoriawaw, @moules1, all then employed by the BBC and other broadcasters, almost all as communications officers. In other sectors connected to or invested in the season’s production @chris\_maccc, @cmt\_morven, @LondonSE4, @SianTMmakeup, @tallybookbinder, @sophie\_gilpin, @BUFVC, @DanBiddle, @issyvb, @MisAchievement, @RobertHugill, @SaraMohrPietsch, @BBCSO, @derbyscene, @juliette08, @SubikaAnwar, @andrewelias, @CliveConway, @silverrivertv and @hamiltonhoddell. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. They include @eadingas, @mikeharidy, @MathewJLyons, @CarolineLawrenc,

    [@michelleeb,](https://twitter.com/michelleeb)@\_alisongray , @mollyflatt , [@HelenHollick](https://twitter.com/HelenHollick), @HMStack, [@LouMorgan](https://twitter.com/LouMorgan)‏and

    [@Thriftygal](https://twitter.com/Thriftygal)‏. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Film and television fans tweeting the season included @Kayleyalderson\_, @AlessiaCarmincino, @missjodiebates, @AssortedBuffrey, @NFBblog, @DouxReviews, @Sinjoor, @beckygracelea. Theatre fans included @Strange\_Brooch, @Kirsten\_SE, @maxi\_fatefull, and @TheeAmorRhys (from UK, Germany and Switzerland). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. @KarenWaylowski, @mcwacan, @eeeve, @actioncomics, @lalla68, @Ekanze444 and @K\_Hawke represent a few of the individual fan accounts posting on Shakespeare Unlocked. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The phrase is a quotation from *Richard II’*s monologue on the fate of kings (III.ii.160) as well as being the title of John Barton’s 1961 theatrical and musical anthology entertainment. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Her profile describes her as located in Chester with interests including: ‘Animal Behaviour Graduate..Fangirl..Avenger..Pokemon Trainer..’. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Anna’s social media profiles picture a young woman living in Russia, who describes herself as loving love and travel. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. His twitter profiles indicated that he is currently the CEO of a private jet travel company [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For instance, key slots on Glastonbury’s Pyramid stage increasingly host ‘veteran’ performers, with the average age of its headline acts jumping from 26 in the 1970s to 39 in the 2010s. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. A Baltimore medical practitioner, British football and boxing fan and French TV drama series fan respectively. @ahremsee’s account could not be found in 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The 1951 Festival of Britain’s boasted the use of outdoor plug-ins for live broadcasting from its site on London’s Southbank while rumours of Dolly Parton miming at Glastonbury in 2014 dogged reception of her set. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. That this was not always realized is evidenced by commentators on Twitter, see previous section ‘Shakespeare Unlocked on Twitter’. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. French actress Clémence Poesy (playing Katherine in *Henry* V) graced several weekend supplements on the *Hollow Crown* as a token of internationalism in the otherwise very patriotically marketed series. Other international co-operation – which must have existed in order to film programmes in locations from India to Italy – was conspicuous by the lack of remark it garnered in a year when Team GB mentality overspilled from media coverage of sports to arts and culture. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Stages at Glastonbury which give their names to different physical areas of the site, which festival-goers are encouraged to wander between, but also connote different types of music and audiences. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Linnemann writes of festivals as ‘first and foremost, celebrations of a particular time or place’ (Linnemann 2010: 239), while Stephen Purcell laments the World Shakespeare Festival’s suffering ‘from a sense of geographical and temporal dislocation’ in comparison to the Globe to Globe: ‘Globe to Globe took place in a single, shared-light location over a mere six weeks, whereas the WSF was spread over several months and numerous locations across the country’ (Purcell 2015: 151). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)