

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Folger Shakespeare Library, creator; Rebeca Sheir, Neva Grant,
and Barbara Bogaev, hosts. Shakespeare Unlimited

Sheila Coursey et Jess Hamlet

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folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited.

The Folger Shakespeare Library's podcast, *Shakespeare Unlimited*, lives up to its name. With more than 200 episodes as of the writing of this review, this is truly a Shakespeare podcast without limitations. Episode topics run the gamut from the copy of Shakespeare's complete works making the rounds of the Robben Island prison during Nelson Mandela's incarceration there ([episode 1](#)) to an examination of Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath ([episode 206](#)), and everything in between. There are conversations with some of the great Shakespearean actors of our day, such as Ian McKellen ([episodes 194](#) and [195](#)); episodes that offer practical advice about staging Shakespeare's plays; episodes on Shakespeare and race; and episodes on comedy, history, tragedy, romance, the plague, adaptation, the American presidency, Star Wars, poetry, education and pedagogy, music, geography, and much more. Shakespeare experts and novices alike will be hard-pressed to find nothing of interest here, as the podcast is a treasure trove of new ideas, new ways of thinking, and new avenues of exploration for Shakespeare and early modern England more generally.

Episodes are pitched for a general audience and run around 30–40 minutes each. Listeners need not have any special affinity for or understanding of Shakespeare or his works to engage with these episodes. The hosts (Rebeca Sheir, Neva Grant, and Barbara Bogaev) do an excellent job of asking questions and helping situate the listener within each episode. [Episode 200](#), for example, is a conversation between host Barbara Bogaev and scholar Ian Smith about his new book, *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race* (2022). At Bogaev's prompting, Smith begins by debunking the perennial claim that there were no Black people in Shakespeare's England, and questions the ways that Shakespeare's contemporaries linked Black skin to evil. Smith then suggests that Shakespeare actually presents Othello as an analogue to Jesus in order to flip the "Black = bad" narrative on its head. While longtime podcast listeners (as well as Shakespeare scholars and practitioners) are likely to be familiar with the early modern practice of casting Black-skinned characters in the roles of

villains and antagonizers, Smith's suggestion about Othello and Jesus is new. *Shakespeare Unlimited* is designed to introduce new ideas to listeners with each episode, with not much being outside the realm of possibility. While every episode *can* be for every listener, this is also a perfect podcast for listeners who only want to tune in for episodes they find particularly interesting; listeners who tune in and out will not have a sense of missing continuity or narrative. Indeed, returning guests often gesture back to earlier episodes in which they appeared and create scaffolding for listeners; for example, Bogaev asks Smith how his recent book offers a response to some of the resistance Smith recounted experiencing in his previous episode on Othello and blackface (episode 50). On the podcast's website, a "Related Episode" banner clusters together repeat guests as well as thematically connected episodes, allowing listeners to trace connections through the impressively deep episode archive.

Indeed, though one can listen to the podcast through most platforms (Apple Podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud), *Shakespeare Unlimited's* website (linked within the Folger Shakespeare Library's main site) offers the best way to navigate through its episodes. Each episode is listed in chronological order, but you can also explore by play or by topic; while we were writing this review, the website actually underwent revision to organize its content via a tagging system with tags such as "Actor Interviews" or "Staging Shakespeare." This tagging process is a bit harder to navigate since one must find, for example, an episode listed with the "Richard III" tag to find other episodes filtered under that tag or use the search function to anticipate potential tags. Some of this reorganization feels like a loss—episodes are now listed about 12 to a page instead of in a list of titles all on one page, and episode numbers are not included after episode 200 (nor do they have a place in the episode's title any longer). But each episode has its own transcript, which has clearly been checked and prepared by a real person and not AI software, and the transcripts let the episodes unfold naturally, with all the hijinks, stumbles, interruptions, and backtracking of conversation. The aforementioned "Related" banner also includes links to relevant public-facing resources from the Folger's collections, from digitized archival material to full-text editions of relevant plays.

These supplementary materials are particularly helpful for instructors who hope to use podcast episodes in the classroom, since hyperlinks can beckon potentially interested students down pathways to further research. Most episodes are offered as general introductions to a topic, though many of those topics are

quite specific. Students can use podcast episodes as jumping-off points into further research areas or questions. The tone of the interviews would suit an undergraduate audience, and we were particularly impressed by the inclusion of performed excerpts of plays discussed from the Folger audiobook editions, which help anchor student audiences in the texts. Hearing the plays aloud offers an illustration of nuance not often immediately available to students only encountering the plays through the written text. Nora Titone's episode on the rivalry of Edwin and John Wilkes Booth ([episode 114](#)), for example, would serve as an excellent supplement to a seminar reading *Julius Caesar* or *Richard III*, as it offers a snapshot into nineteenth-century performance history while gesturing to the ongoing stakes of defining and representing tyranny in the United States.

Given that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has limited graduate student access to live events in recent years, we were also struck by how useful certain episodes would be in modelling how to give a public-facing talk on a research project. In this respect, Ambereen Dadabhoy's episode, "Race and Blackness in Elizabethan England" ([episode 168](#)), offers a masterclass in mapping an ongoing critical discussion in relation to Dadabhoy's own research and teaching practices for a potentially unfamiliar audience. Advanced undergraduate students and graduate students alike can learn how to speak about their research while also anticipating questions from an unfamiliar audience. Indeed, the tone of the podcast resembles the professional-but-informal cadence of a successful conference roundtable; interviewees and interviewers are clearly prepared but not scripted, and there is plenty of room for improvisation. While some episodes feature well-known scholarly leaders of Shakespeare studies, the podcast also features independent scholars and non-tenure-track/contingent faculty (though we would love to see more). The breadth of guest professions (actors, directors, high school teachers, dramaturgs, poets, chefs, and more) offers both a mosaic of the ways that people engage with Shakespeare and an introduction to various disciplinary or methodological approaches.

Given *Shakespeare Unlimited's* focus on this multiplicity, we also felt it necessary to draw attention to the collaborative process of the podcast's production. Its recording and editing models a collaboration between Shakespeare scholars (like Folger director Michael Witmore, who frequently opens episodes, and former director Gail Kern Paster, who edits episodes) and radio journalists (hosts Rebeca Sheir, Neva Grant, and Barbara Bogaev) who are not

affiliated with the Folger Shakespeare Library. While this type of project might not be feasible for groups or institutions with less access to funding, it does offer an exciting model for future collaboration, especially as programs such as Podcasting for the Humanities at the National Humanities Center (nationalhumanitiescenter.org/education-programs/graduate-students/podcasting-humanities-dec-20) seek to train graduate students and faculty in sound recording and design and consider how institutions may incorporate public-facing work like podcasting within formal evaluations of faculty work.

SHEILA COURSEY

Saint Louis University

JESS HAMLET

Alvernia University

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