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# The Precariousness of Human Existence in William Shakespeare's Plays: A Ukrainian Perspective

## *Abstract*

The study of precarity has emerged as a new theoretical interest in the humanities in response to contemporary global crises such as military conflicts, terrorist attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, ecological disasters, and climate change. In the Ukrainian context, where war and geopolitical instability remain ever-present, the exploration of precarity resonates deeply. This article examines the exploration of the precariousness of human existence in William Shakespeare's

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plays through a distinctly Ukrainian lens. It engages with the ongoing war in Ukraine, the nation's experiences of trauma, loss, resilience, and with the therapeutic potential of Shakespeare-related programmes. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of precariousness and precarity, this essay analyses how Shakespeare's plays address the fundamental vulnerabilities of human life linked to health, race, and social inequities. It pays particular attention to the precariousness of human existence, with a focus on the realities of war, political power, and the system of government. The plays used in the analysis are *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry V*, *Richard II*, and *Richard III*. The paper concludes that Shakespeare's exploration of precarious existence speaks not only to the fragility of life in his time but also mirrors the existential challenges faced by Ukrainians today, making his works relevant to both local and global audiences.

**Keywords:** *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Henry V*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, precariousness, precarity, vulnerability, Judith Butler, human existence, race, epidemics, disability, political power, war, Ukraine.

Recent debates in the humanities have focused on precariousness and precarity, conceptualising a state of heightened vulnerability, marked by ongoing exposure to potential harm or instability. These concepts embrace not only the potential for physical danger but also the social and emotional risks that characterise modern life. Global events such as terrorist attacks, military conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic, and ecological crises have starkly illustrated the fragile state of humanity. The profound losses and risks faced by civilians, particularly children in war zones, along with the pervasive threat of disease and environmental degradation, have amplified the visibility of pain, trauma, and precariousness in the lexicon of both contemporary politics and the arts. In the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, the consideration of precariousness has taken on a heightened significance. The war has not only brought extensive human suffering and displacement, but has raised urgent questions about the resilience of cultural identity and the endurance of human values in times of extreme crisis. This painful reality underscores the resonance of precarity and vulnerability with current Ukrainian experiences and the global challenges concerning stability and peace.

Humanities today are seriously engaging with these ideas, not only in socio-political but also in aesthetic terms. A host of related terms have entered critical discourse as well, such as precarious, precarisation, and the precariat. They collectively underscore a shared concern with instability and risk. Literature, film, and art reflect and interrogate the experiences of precarity, ranging from post-9/11 fiction, which probes the causes and impacts of the 2001 attacks, to narratives that depict lives shaped by inequality and uncertainty. Through diverse aesthetic

modes, these works strive to mediate experiences of precarity and cultivate a nuanced awareness of these realities.

Recent Ukrainian literature has also engaged with the precarity of human existence amid the realities of war, contributing significant perspectives to this discourse. Alongside other global narratives, the Ukrainian works explore the precarious state of existence in conflict zones, illustrating both the vulnerability and resilience inherent in the human experience. Together, they enrich the understanding of precarity and the diverse ways in which individuals and communities navigate, resist, and endure it.

However, the exploration of precarity is not unique to our contemporary moment. We argue that William Shakespeare's life and oeuvre offer a compelling lens through which the precariousness of human existence can be examined. By analysing his works, one can trace how earlier periods confronted vulnerability and danger, fostered resilience, and can offer insights that resonate with the contemporary struggle for identity and survival in Ukraine. This approach enables us to appreciate the enduring engagement with precariousness across time and place.

Here we study the precariousness of human existence in William Shakespeare's plays through a distinctly Ukrainian perspective engaging with the ongoing war in Ukraine since 2014 and the nation's experiences of trauma, loss, and resilience. The selection of Shakespeare's plays examined in this context includes *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Merchant of Venice* as examples of the way in which Shakespeare dramatises universal human vulnerability and systemic conditions that exacerbate suffering. Additionally, precariousness and war are investigated in three of the histories: *Henry V*, *Richard II*, and *Richard III*, in an attempt to highlight how political and military instability contributes to the precarity of individuals and societies. We seek to provide a nuanced understanding of precariousness across Shakespeare's tragedies and history plays.

The study of the precariousness of human existence has deep roots in philosophy, emerging in existential, phenomenological, and ethical discourses. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger introduces the concept of "Dasein" ("existence", "being there") as fundamentally shaped by the awareness of mortality: "Death is a possibility of being that Dasein always has to take upon itself. Dasein stands before itself in its almost potentiality-of-being [...]. Death is a possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death [...] is an eminent imminence" (241). Such awareness creates a profound anxiety, revealing the precariousness and finitude at the core of human existence.

Philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hannah Arendt further explored fragility and vulnerability emphasizing the dependency and limitations inherent in human life. These thinkers indirectly reflect on precariousness as a universal condition, laying the groundwork for Judith Butler's focus on its philosophical and systemic political dimensions.

Butler's work is foundational for understanding precarity in both its philosophical and political aspects. In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* and *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, she distinguishes between "precariousness" and "precarity". Precariousness, according to Butler, is a universal human condition derived from shared interdependency and vulnerability: "Lives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed" (Butler, *Frames of War* 25). This universal fragility necessitates a new "bodily ontology" that rethinks vulnerability, injurability, and interdependency (Butler, *Frames of War* 3). In contrast, precarity refers to a politically induced condition unequally distributed across societal groups. It highlights systemic inequalities that leave marginalised groups more exposed to violence, economic insecurity, and neglect. According to Butler, "Precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, *Frames of War* 25). Guy Standing's concept of the "precarariat," as outlined in his *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, further enriches this analysis. His exploration of precariousness – including economic instability, health vulnerability, conflict, and social inequalities – offers a productive framework for the exploration of the themes of fragility and instability in Shakespeare's works. By employing Standing's approach, Shakespeare's plays can be understood as engaging with precariousness on both existential and systemic levels, connecting the precarities of his time with those of today. By applying this theoretical framework, our study highlights the interconnectedness of human lives and suggests that the precarity evident in Shakespeare's works transcends time and geography, to offer an insight into Ukraine's present challenges.

In recent years, the link between Shakespeare and precariousness has also been explored in relation to race, social inequality, disability, etc. Patricia Akhimié's *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World* examines, for instance, how Othello's blackness excludes him from upward mobility within Venetian society, which views his skin colour as a marker of distrust and inferiority. Similarly, *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, edited by her, investigates how Shakespeare's characters are shaped by intersections of race, identity, and societal expectations, further illuminating the social precarity associated with race in his plays. As Urvashi Chakravarty notes in her contribution, "Race is made and insistently remade through institutional systems of power" (14), emphasizing how racial identities in Shakespeare's works are both constructed and constrained by societal structures. Thus, this body of work reflects a growing scholarly interest in understanding Shakespeare's treatment of racial inequalities and their impact on identity and social standing.

In *Shakespeare and Disability Studies*, Sonya Freeman Loftis explores another valuable intersection, between Shakespeare studies and disability studies, highlighting how character-based readings of disability deepen the understanding of historical perspectives on it. Loftis notes:

While there are limitations in and complications to applying disability theory to Shakespeare characters, there are also key reasons to keep fields of Shakespeare studies and disability studies in dialogue with each other. Character-based readings of disability contribute significantly to knowledge about what disability was in earlier cultures. (8)

Loftis also suggests that Shakespeare's plays may offer psychological relief, and that Shakespeare therapy programmes can foster "a genuine sense of inclusion for people with disabilities" (14) and provide a path to emotional healing, reinforcing the resilience of those affected by war. For a Ukrainian audience, especially amid the trauma of the Russian invasion against the country, the healing potential of Shakespeare's works holds particular significance, as it does for wounded Ukrainian military personnel and civilians who now live with disabilities.

It is important to emphasise that Shakespeare studies have actively engaged with precarity, vulnerability and the therapeutic use of Shakespeare. A symposium titled *Touching Shakespeare: Proximity, Precarity, and Resilience in Renaissance Drama and Modern Life*, hosted by the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at the University of California explored precarity in Renaissance drama, linking human vulnerability to existential and political themes. Shakespeare's plays were seen as records of survival and insights into precarity, resilience, and interdependence, offering perspectives on modern challenges shaped by human and ecological factors. In 2020, *Representing Disability in Shakespeare's World* examined historical and disability studies perspectives on military-related disability from Shakespeare's England to today. In 2021, Ukraine hosted *The Bard in the Context of the Pandemic: Shakespeare and/as Medicine*, an international conference examining Shakespeare's works through the lens of COVID-19. Scholars explored his texts as reflections on survival and crisis adaptation, highlighting the relevance of precarity in Shakespeare studies and the broader issue of human vulnerability (Торкут [Torkut] 165–187).

During Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, which began with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, every Ukrainian has been experiencing various manifestations of existential precarity. Ukrainian artists and researchers have actively employed the therapeutic potential of Shakespeare's works to enhance the resilience of the Ukrainian nation, which faces precarity intensified by the genocidal nature of the war. A notable example of harnessing the psychotherapeutic potential of Shakespeare's works is *Project W: Veterans, Volunteers, and William*, initiated

by combat veteran Ihor Kasyan. This initiative culminated in the creation of an amateur English-language production of *Twelfth Night*, directed by actor and theatre director Oleksii Hnatkovskyi.<sup>1</sup> The performance combined Shakespeare's comedic text with personal accounts and lived experiences of war. The project aimed at involving veterans in the socio-cultural life of the country through art (Костюк [Kostyuk]). It provided a platform for veterans and volunteers – individuals who played an active role in resisting Russian aggression – to explore their inner potential, draw attention to their rehabilitation and resocialisation, and promote a positive image of Ukrainian veterans beyond the country's borders.

Another initiative, *The Flute's Heart Beats in Unison with Ukraine*, by London-based Flute Theatre, led by Kelly Hunter,<sup>2</sup> has supported Ukrainian refugee children suffering war trauma and children with autism, through performances of *Pericles*, *The Tempest*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The European Shakespeare Research Association (ESRA) has also shown solidarity with Ukraine. The project *Shakespeare Shelter*, launched in 2023 by Nicoleta Cinpoș and Imke Lichterfeld, on the first anniversary of the Russian invasion, provides both intellectual engagement and a space for personal stories and networking. As Cinpoș states, "It was born out of our love, unconditional support, and duty to Ukraine and its people, all of which we wanted to reassert one year after the horrific, full-scale invasion and war atrocities that are plaguing your beautiful country. It was a small gesture to bring friends and colleagues together" (Kvasnytsia, Cinpoș). Subsequent events, including the *Shakespeare and Resistance Workshop* (July 2023) and *Reviewing Shakespeare on Stage* (2024), contributed to the First International Shakespeare Festival in Ivano-Frankivsk, which showcased the wartime resilience of Ukraine.

## William Shakespeare's Plays: An Encyclopaedia of Precariousness Existential Precariousness

The fragility of human existence, the inevitability of death, and the inner turmoil stemming from life's uncertainties are recurring themes in Shakespeare's writings. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare meticulously studies existential precariousness through Prince Hamlet's inner conflict. The character's introspection and philosophical musings reveal the fragility of human identity, the burden of choice, and the instability of moral certainty, with Hamlet's emotional and intellectual struggles serving as a profound exploration of the precarious nature of existence. Andy Mousley observes in *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity*: "Rather than acting as sources of identification, human nature and

<sup>1</sup> See the article by Oksana Fedorkiv and David Livingstone in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> See Daria Lazarenko and Imke Lichterfeld's interview with Kelly Hunter in this volume.

human existence become the site, for Hamlet, of uncertainties and questions. He is exposed to a variety of beliefs and behaviours, each with its own assumptions about what it is to be a human" (33). This insight underscores Hamlet's exposure to conflicting ideas about humanity, intensifying the existential turmoil he faces.

Hamlet's inner crisis begins with the sudden death of his father and the swift remarriage of his mother to his uncle. These disruptive events shatter his sense of stability, leaving him questioning the integrity of his family and the meaning of life itself. His famous soliloquy "To be, or not to be: that is the question," (3.1.55–89)<sup>3</sup> epitomizes this crisis, as he contemplates the pain of existence against the fear of the unknown in death. At this point in the play, Hamlet reflects on the inherent suffering of life, expressing a desire to escape it yet hesitating due to an uncertainty about what lies beyond. This moment captures his vulnerability as he confronts fundamental questions about mortality and the purpose of human life. Shakespeare's deployment of Hamlet's personal introspection becomes an exploration of existential precariousness as a universal experience, affecting anyone who confronts life's uncertainties and inevitable end.

This struggle is intensified by Hamlet's loss of moral certainty. When the Ghost reveals Claudius's crime and demands revenge, Hamlet faces a dilemma that conflicts with his Christian values. His inability to act decisively reflects his moral precariousness, as he fears that seeking revenge could ultimately ruin him. In early modern understanding and law, private revenge had become illegal, and regicide an act of both treason and blasphemy when seen according to the doctrine of the divine right of kings. This moral and legal struggle makes Hamlet's existential condition even more precarious, trapping him between the opposing forces of duty and ethical restraint. Hamlet's struggle with identity and self-doubt further intensifies his existential crisis. He questions his role as a son, prince, and avenger, wondering why he cannot meet the expectations he sets for himself. Not once in the play does this self-doubt reflect the precariousness of Hamlet's sense of self, as he grapples with an ideal of himself that he feels he cannot fulfil, fuelling his frustration and despair.

Death as the ultimate escape becomes a persistent theme in Hamlet's existential reflections. As the play progresses, he becomes increasingly preoccupied with the idea of mortality and the futility of human ambition. In Act 4, Scene 3, he muses on the fate of human bodies after death: "A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king, and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm" (4.3.27–29). This image of death conveys Hamlet's view of mortality as a leveller of human status, ambition, and identity. For him, death means the end of existential suffering and a kind of refuge, but paradoxically, death is the unknown he fears.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. (Updated Fourth Edition). Ed. David Bevington. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1997.

Finally, Hamlet's isolation and alienation also contribute to his existential precariousness. As Hamlet's introspection deepens, he grows increasingly distrustful of those around him, distancing himself from his mother and rejecting Ophelia. Even his friendships grow strained, as he sees betrayal in those who were once his allies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and his only true friend, Horatio, is unable to fully understand the depths of his existential despair. This alienation leaves Hamlet isolated with his thoughts and queries about the sense of existence.

In the context of war, contemporary Ukrainian poetry often echoes Shakespeare's exploration of existential precariousness. Hamlet's meditations on mortality and the arbitrary nature of death resonate deeply in Victoria Amelina's "Alert" ("Тривога"):

повітряна тривога по всій  
країні  
так наче щоразу ведуть на розстріл  
усіх  
а цілять лише в одного  
переважно, того хто скраю  
сьогодні не ти, відбий  
(Амеліна 5)

[povitrâna trivoga po vsij kraïni  
tak nače šorazu vedut' na rozstril  
usih  
a cilât' liše v odnogo  
perevažno, togo hto skraû  
s'ogodni ne ti, vidbij  
(Amelina 5)]

Air raid alert across the country,  
as if each time, they lead all to be shot —  
but no, they aim for just one,  
mostly, the one on the edge.  
Today, it's not you. End of the air-raid  
alert  
(Amelina, transl. Bandrovská)

Her poem captures the randomness of survival, much like Hamlet's existential crisis in "To be, or not to be", where life and death hang in uncertain balance, exposing human vulnerability in both literature and lived experience.

### Social Precariousness: Race Inequalities

In Ukraine, ongoing displacement and migration in the face of war-induced precariousness is exemplified by the forced exile and persecution of Crimean Tatars following Russia's annexation of Crimea. It parallels Shakespeare's exploration of racial and social vulnerabilities, reflected not only through central figures, like Othello, but also through the fates of minor characters across his plays. Through

characters such as Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*), Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*), Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*), Caliban (*The Tempest*), and Imogen's cross-cultural ties in *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare examines racial and cultural precariousness across diverse social contexts.

In *Othello*, the focus is on race and its impact on social precariousness, especially channelled through the character of Othello, a Moor and outsider in Venetian society. Although Othello is a respected general, his racial identity places him in a precarious social position, making him vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination despite his achievements. Shakespeare presents Othello as a complex character, both honoured and marginalised, whose status and accomplishments cannot fully shield him from the biases of those around him.

This vulnerability is starkly revealed through Iago's manipulation, which taps into the racial prejudices of Venetian society to undermine Othello's confidence and reputation. From the beginning, Iago and others exploit racial stereotypes, referring to Othello in derogatory terms. Iago incites Brabantio by referring to Othello as an "old black ram" who is "tupping [his] white ewe" (1.1.90–91), using bestial imagery to emphasize racial difference and provoke outrage. This attitude isolates Othello, fostering his sense of alienation and fuelling his self-doubt.

Shakespeare consistently and meticulously traces how social instability and racial prejudice increase Othello's self-doubt, and his downfall symbolizes the fragility of identity in a prejudiced society. This dynamic echoes Ukraine's Soviet past, when Ukrainian intellectuals and scientists, despite their achievements, faced repression, forced conformity, and accusations of nationalism. Like Othello, they were made vulnerable by external forces that sought to undermine their self-worth and legitimacy. Their experiences highlight how ideological control shapes both professional and personal destinies, demonstrating that prejudice – whether racial or political – limits individuals, regardless of their virtues or accomplishments.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare explores the theme of social precariousness through the character of Shylock, a Jewish moneylender marginalised within Venetian society. Although Shylock is financially successful and plays a vital role in the city's commerce, his Jewish identity makes him vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination. Shakespeare presents Shylock as both powerful and excluded, with his financial stability unable to shield him from the deep-seated biases of the Christian majority around him.

Shylock's precarious position is evident in his treatment by other characters, particularly Antonio, who openly disdains Shylock's profession and religion. Antonio frequently insults him and even spits on him, calling him a "cut-throat dog" (1.3.109). Such hostility reveals how Shylock's identity as a Jew places him in an uncertain social position, where he is both needed and despised, respected for his wealth yet scorned for his beliefs. This contradictory attitude fosters Shylock's sense of isolation and fuels his resentment. His vulnerability is further

emphasized in the trial scene, where he seeks justice for Antonio's failure to fulfil his obligations. Although Shylock attempts to use the law to his advantage, he is ultimately denied true justice and is instead stripped of his wealth and forced to convert to Christianity. His line "I am content" (4.1.410), which Shylock utters upon resigning to this fate, captures the tragic depth of his social precariousness.

Moreover, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare explores the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and gender precarity, particularly through Jessica, Shylock's daughter. As a Jewish woman who converts to Christianity upon marrying Lorenzo, Jessica's identity is marked by complex layers of marginalisation, making her position precarious in both her father's community and in Venetian society at large. Urvashi Chakravarty observes that "the accusation, however brief or foreclosed, of 'theft' here by a white Christian man (despite, or indeed because of, the fact that this man is her own husband) gestures to the continued precarity and marginalization of Jessica's position" (25). This accusation highlights how Jessica's gender and racial background, even after her conversion, render her vulnerable to suspicion and reinforce her status as an outsider within Christian society.

Thus, overall, *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as the other plays, serve as a commentary on the precarious nature of identity within a society shaped by intolerance, demonstrating how discrimination undermines stability and human dignity. Today, this can reflect upon Ukraine's war-induced precariousness.

## Health Precariousness: Epidemics and Disease

The time during which Shakespeare lived and worked was marked by frequent and devastating outbreaks of epidemic diseases. Among the many illnesses of the early modern age – including smallpox, malaria, syphilis, and typhus – the plague was the most persistent and deadly, making health during this period particularly vulnerable. Historical records indicate epidemics occurred almost every decade of Shakespeare's life, including 1578–1579, 1582, 1592–1593, and 1603 (Forgeng xiv). In 1564, just three months after Shakespeare's birth, Stratford-upon-Avon experienced a severe flare-up of the plague, which killed a quarter of the population – over 200 residents in six months (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust). The outbreak posed a significant threat to newborn Shakespeare's survival, as the plague claimed the lives of many infants and adults in Stratford-upon-Avon during that period. The death of the playwright, as well as his birth, were also possibly connected with epidemics. Charles Creighton notes that Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, after three days of fever, during "the most unhealthy" year recorded in parish registers from the beginning of the century (537). Although the specific cause of his death remains unclear, the connection between it and the rampant illnesses of his time underscores the precariousness of individual life and the broader societal context in which it is lived.

The 1603 plague outbreak in London, which claimed over 30,000 lives (Creighton 477), forced theatres to close, disrupting Shakespeare's career. As Andrew Gurr explains, "the playhouses should not open until the weekly bill of victims had been less than fifty for three weeks. In 1604, the Privy Council brought it down to thirty a week" (78). Another outbreak, in 1606, shut the Globe Theatre again, halting a promising season. These disruptions affected theatrical livelihoods and deepened Shakespeare's engagement with human vulnerability, shaping his portrayal of characters and their struggles.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, where the impact of epidemics is direct, disease serves both as a metaphor and a plot device. Mercutio, fatally wounded during the feud between the Montagues and Capulets, curses both families: "A plague o' both your houses! / They have made worms' meat of me. / I have it, and soundly, too. Your houses!" (3.1.105–107). The curse, rooted in the reality of the plague as a deadly force, reflects the character's despair and underscores the destructive consequences of the feud. For contemporary audiences, the plague would have been an all-too-familiar threat, making Mercutio's words a powerful condemnation of the families' relentless conflict. Anticipated by Mercutio, the plague's role becomes literal, enabling the tragic conclusion to the play. Romeo's and Juliet's deaths are indirectly caused by an outbreak of the disease, which prevents Friar Lawrence's message from reaching Romeo, as Friar John, tasked with delivering the letter, explains, "So fearful were they of infection" (5.2.14). Thus, quarantined due to the fear of "infectious pestilence" (5.2.5), Friar John's delay leads to the miscommunication that seals the lovers' fates, making the plague an active force in the tragedy, symbolising the uncontrollable forces that disrupt human plans and lives. This serves as a poignant reminder of the precariousness of existence in Shakespeare's time and its profound impact on his storytelling.

In *Richard II*, the idea of health precariousness is evoked in John of Gaunt's Sceptred Isle speech in which England is a "fortress built by Nature for herself / Against infection" (2.1.43–44), a natural bastion, protected by its geography from external threats of disease. The fear of "infection" reflects both literal fears of contagion and metaphorical concerns about moral and political corruption. While primarily symbolic, the reference resonates with anxieties about epidemics, linking the speech indirectly to themes of health and vulnerability.

Overall, epidemic diseases were a defining feature of Shakespeare's time, and his work shows a deep awareness of humanity's vulnerability and the fragility of life amid widespread illness. His contemporaries were also troubled by and engaged with it, as did Ben Jonson in *The Alchemist*, John Davies in *The Triumph of Death* (1603), and Thomas Dekker in *The Seven Deadly Sins of London* (1606). The global impact of COVID-19 has renewed interest in literary responses to pandemics and has encouraged parallels between past and present crises.

## Physical Precariousness: Characters with Disabilities

In Ukraine, the issue of disability has become increasingly significant due to Russia's war, as injured veterans and civilians face challenges of reintegration and social adaptation. This experience resonates with Shakespeare's exploration of how physical precarity can shape identity, social roles, and relationships, as seen in characters whose disabilities influence their place in society and their interactions with others.

Considering the definition of disability as any physical or mental difference that significantly limits activity, Loftis argues that it is too narrow to focus only on the character of Richard III when examining disability in Shakespeare's works. Instead, a wide range of characters and impairments should come into view: Othello's and Caesar's seizures, Gloucester's blindness in *King Lear*, Katherine's limp in *The Taming of the Shrew*, as well as madness, obesity, and infertility experienced by other characters (Loftis 5). By depicting characters whose disability affects their social roles and relationships, Shakespeare examines the complex interplay between physical precarity and its societal implications.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare presents physical precariousness caused by blindness and madness, intertwining these conditions with ageing and vulnerability. The Earl of Gloucester, violently deprived of his sight through the betrayal of his illegitimate son, Edmund, embodies both physical and emotional fragility. Stripped of sight and independence, Gloucester realises that "[he] stumbled when [he] saw" (4.1.19), suggesting that his blindness symbolises a deeper, existential inability to perceive the dangers within his own family.

King Lear himself, though not physically disabled in a conventional sense, endures the precariousness of ageing, which renders him susceptible to manipulation and ultimately drives him into madness. His gradual loss of power and the disintegration of his authority as he divides his kingdom among his daughters depict a profound instability tied to both age and identity. As he loses his mental faculties, Lear's sense of self erodes: "O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!" (1.5.45). His mental decline becomes a metaphor for the vulnerability of human existence, capturing the fragility of a king who once wielded absolute authority, yet is now at the mercy of Others. These experiences of physical and mental deterioration reflect a broader existential conflict at the heart of *King Lear*, extending beyond the personal to examine state, power, and the nature of existence, heavily resonant in today's world.

In *Richard III*, the protagonist embodies precariousness tied to his physical condition. Born with a spinal deformity, Richard is "rudely stamped" (1.1.18) and "curtailed of this fair proportion" (1.1.19), which contributes to his sense of exclusion and fuels his desire for power. His deformity becomes both a source of marginalisation and a justification for his ambition, as he compensates for

perceived inadequacy with aggression and manipulation, linking his physical condition to psychological and social impact. In Act 5, Scene 3, Richard's language reveals his fractured identity and inner conflict:

Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.  
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.  
 Then fly! What, from myself? Great reason. Why?  
 Lest I revenge. Myself upon myself?  
 Alack, I love myself... O no, alas, I rather hate myself...  
 I am a villain. Yet I lie: I am not.

(*Richard III* 5.3.183–191)

Richard's oscillation between self-love and self-hatred captures his existential precariousness, as he struggles to reconcile his actions with his self-concept. His self-interrogation, "Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am" (5.3.184), illustrates his inability to unify his deeds with his identity, reflecting an instability shaped by both his physical difference and his moral degradation.

Richard's deformity influences his statesmanship by prompting a defensive and ruthless style of leadership. Aware of societal prejudice, he compensates for this with a calculated, often aggressive, pursuit of control. The character's self-analysis is marked by bitterness and self-doubt, suggesting that his disability amplifies his existential struggles and drives his quest for power as a means of self-validation.

Besides, in Shakespeare's plays, characters often experience sudden losses of control, which also highlight human vulnerability. Seizures, a key symptom of epilepsy, were largely misunderstood in Shakespeare's time, and the stigma surrounding epilepsy remains a modern issue. For contemporary audiences, it is fascinating to see how Shakespeare, one of the first to represent epilepsy on stage, approached this condition. In *Julius Caesar*, the titular character's epilepsy – 'the falling sickness' – reveals his fragility, foreshadowing his downfall: "Caesar fell down at the market-place, and foamed at mouth, and was speechless" (*Julius Caesar* 1.2. 252–253). In *Othello*, the protagonist suffers a trance or seizure onstage, described by Iago as "epilepsy": "My lord is fall'n into an epilepsy. This is his second fit" (*Othello* 4.1.63).

Shakespeare highlights the unpredictability and fragility of human existence by showing his powerful characters vulnerable to medical conditions and loss of control. His portrayal of precariousness reveals the enduring nature of physical and emotional vulnerability. By depicting characters whose disabilities shape their struggles and societal roles, he highlights the fragility of strength and control, which has remained relevant for centuries and is particularly poignant today in Ukraine.

## Political and Military Precariousness: War and Conflict

Reflection on war and conflict is pervasive in Shakespeare's plays, revealing the political and military precariousness of his time, a reality that deeply resonates with Ukraine today as it endures the ongoing Russian aggression, grappling with the human, social, and geopolitical consequences of military aggression. Nowhere is this more evident than in Shakespeare's history plays, where struggles for power and territorial disputes take centre stage. In *Henry V*, the focus is on the war with France, national identity and leadership under the strain of conflict. In *Richard II*, the narrative shifts to civil war, exposing the instability of kingship and the chaos of internal division. Similarly, *Henry IV*, Part 1 portrays rebellion and the looming threat of civil unrest, while *Henry VI* explores the devastating impact of prolonged civil conflict on a nation.

*Henry V* starts with Henry's transformation from Prince Hal to King, raising the question of moral responsibility and the precariousness of leadership. Seeking advice from his counsellors regarding his claim to the French crown, he acknowledges the human toll of war: "For God doth know how many now in health / Shall drop their blood" (1.2.18–22). Henry not only realises that many healthy men will shed blood and become casualties of war, but is also aware that the innate vulnerability of soldiers is directly related to the political and strategic decisions of those in power. He is aware of the burden of responsibility that he, as king, shares with his advisers; putting the "sleeping sword of war" (1.2.25) into action means risking the stability and security of the kingdom. The metaphor of the 'sleeping' sword indicates that war is a dormant threat, dangerous when it wakes up and difficult to control when unleashed. Henry is conscious of war's consequences, of the inevitable bloodshed and suffering, of the "fall of blood, [...] a woe, a sore complaint" (1.2.28–29) that follow when great powers engage in conflict. This acknowledgement adds a layer of ethical and existential precarity, as it shows that even righteous or necessary wars carry a burden of guilt and the uncertainty of unintended, tragic consequences.

In *Henry V*, the battlefield is a place of total precariousness. In Act 4, Scene 6, Exeter recounts to Henry the last minutes between the Duke of York and the Earl of Suffolk, who bravely died: "Suffolk first died, and York, all haggled over, / Comes to him where in gore he lay insteeped, / And takes him by the beard, kisses the gashes" (*Henry V* 4.6.11–13). This vivid imagery underscores the deep bonds between soldiers, the inevitability of death in battle, where bravery does not ensure survival, and where the line between valour and tragedy is blurred. Henry's emotional response is one revealing vulnerability. His answer to Exeter's account of York and Suffolk's deaths is complex: "For, hearing this, I must perforce compound / With my full eyes, or they will issue too. Alarum. / But hark, what new alarum is this same? / The French have reinforced their scattered men. / Then every soldier

kill his prisoners” (4.6.33–37). At first, Shakespeare humanizes Henry, showing his grief. However, the sudden ‘Alarum’ shifts the scene, and his ruthless command to execute prisoners reveals the tension between compassion and strategic necessity. This duality highlights the precariousness inherent in leadership in wartime, where moral dilemmas collide with the demands of survival. Ultimately, the scene captures inescapable fragility induced by war, where death remains an ever-present reality, binding soldiers through both valour and loss.

In *Henry V*, Shakespeare highlights the uncertainty of war, the thin, unpredictable line between victory and defeat, a duality which encompasses contradictory, sometimes unexpected outcomes. Uncertainty and unpredictability are inscribed in the stark difference between the victory of the tired English army, achieved with relatively small losses, and the “ten thousand French / That in the field lie slain” (4.8.73–74). Military triumph is unpredictable and comes at the cost of immense human loss. Despite meticulous planning, war outcomes can shift in ways that defy human control, as the almost miraculous victory at Agincourt testifies. The moment also shows the precariousness of both sides.

This menacing speech addressed to the citizens of Harfleur illustrates the brutality of war and the duality of Henry’s leadership – both unifying and ruthless. Henry threatens the citizens by invoking terrible images of destructive violence and depravity:

I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur  
Till in her ashes she lie buried.  
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,  
And the fleshed soldier, rough and hard of heart,  
In liberty of bloody hand, shall range  
With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass  
Your fresh fair virgins and your flow’ring infants.

(*Henry V* 3.3. 88–95)

While an inspiring ruler, he does not hesitate to use threats of horrible violence to secure victory, revealing the harsh realities of power and conflict.

In *Richard II*, Shakespeare examines the precariousness of monarchy and the chaos that arises in political and civil conflict. The play focuses on the deposition of King Richard II, whose decision to seize the estates of the deceased John of Gaunt to fund his war in Ireland is an act of tyranny that undermines his legitimacy. Richard views the country as his personal possession and wields power to the detriment of the state. As Shakespeare suggests, rebellion against a rightful but unjust king can, under such circumstances, be justified. Richard’s abuse of power leads to the precarity of the monarchy, of the nobility, and of virtually everyone involved in these historical events.

At the same time, the civil war triggered by Richard's downfall shows the fragility of any political order. Henry Bolingbroke's return and the popular rebellion which he spearheads expose the vulnerability of a ruler who lacks both military strength and the support of his subjects. Nor does the play skirt around the personal toll of political instability on Richard himself. His poetic meditation in Act 3 Scene 2 pits divine-right against human frailty, the forces of political upheaval, and death.

Finally, by way of the Bishop of Carlisle, *Richard II* envisages the descent into chaos, pointing to the destabilising effect of the deposition of a monarch on the entire political system. It offers a stark reminder of the destructive impact of civil war as the violent transfer of power lays the groundwork for future conflicts, depicted in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays.

Such insights into the precariousness of political life and war resonate with Ukrainian lived experience, bridging the distance between past and present. From the outset of Ukraine's independence, political and military instability have manifested themselves in various forms, culminating in the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. The objectives of this aggression are openly articulated in Russia, as spelled out in Timofey Sergeytsev's article, "What Should Russia Do with Ukraine?", published in 2022. It lays out a step-by-step genocidal plan of labelling all Ukrainians as "Nazis" and calling for their extermination. This plan ultimately seeks to erase Ukraine as a state, its cultural identity, and even the very word "Ukraine" (Sergeytsev). As Timothy Snyder has observed, in this framework a 'Nazi' is anyone who identifies as Ukrainian. He goes on to describe the publication as "Russia's genocide handbook," "an explicit program for the complete elimination of the Ukrainian nation as such" (Snyder).

The war in Ukraine has intensified multiple forms of precariousness: 1) military – involving death, injuries, and the destruction of infrastructure; 2) social – mass displacement, loss of homes, jobs, and familiar ways of life; 3) psychological – referring to emotional and mental vulnerability. Together, they create a reality where survival becomes an existential challenge, and resilience becomes essential for enduring it.

Shakespeare's plays grapple with crises in human existence, showing how humanity, morality, and freedom can break under the weight of violence and betrayal. Russia's aggression has put to the test humane and moral values by perpetrating war crimes, unleashing poisonous propaganda, and the systematic dehumanisation of Ukrainians. Yet, as in Shakespeare's works, tragedy does not extinguish hope. Solidarity, empathy, and volunteerism in Ukraine show the resilience of its people and the enduring strength of the human spirit.

## Conclusion

In the preface to *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*, James Shapiro observes that from the year 1599, it becomes “no more possible to talk about Shakespeare’s plays independent of his age” (xii). Shakespeare and his fellow players, as Shapiro emphasises, “truly were, in Hamlet’s fine phrase, ‘the abstract and brief chroniclers of the time’” (xii). Among the issues chronicled in his works are political instability, the fragility of power, social inequality, existential doubt, the human consequences of war, plague, ageing, health, racial prejudice, and the estrangement from familial and social interaction. The capacity to articulate the complexities of his own time establishes Shakespeare as a profound early modern chronicler of precariousness, capturing the fragility and vulnerability of human existence in his day, which resonate with the realities of our contemporary world.

To a great degree, Shakespeare’s explorations mirror the existential challenges faced by Ukrainians today, making his works profoundly relevant. In the context of the ongoing war and its devastating effects, they offer a lens through which to reflect on shared human precariousness, vulnerability and resilience. As Judith Butler writes, “peace is the mode of being awake to an Other’s precariousness” (*Precarious Life* 134). It is a message that should resonate particularly with statesmen and leaders of the democratic world as they navigate the complexities of fostering peace and justice in precarious times.

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