INTRODUCTION

This special issue grows out of work, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, on the Elizabethan writer, Thomas Nashe (1567-c.1601).[1] Nashe was part of a generation of writers who – brought up to believe that their education would equip them for a life of public service – graduated to find a dearth of secure jobs (in government, in the church) for which their schooling had prepared them. Some – like Nashe, his friend the playwright Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), or their slightly older contemporaries, Robert Greene (1558-1592) and Thomas Lodge (1557-1625) – turned to their pens to try to make a living, writing for the professional playing companies and the printing presses, and endeavouring to attract the eye of private patrons to support them. Their livelihood was precarious and subject to sudden reversals of fortune: the withdrawal of a patron's favour; intense competition from other writers; the closing of the theatres as a precaution against plague, which would cut off a valuable source of income. Their works consequently express recurrent despair and resentment at a system that seems rigged against them (in which others prosper and their talent goes unrecognised and unrewarded), and seek to debunk and subvert the principles that their learning had instilled in them: principally, that literature and the art of eloquence should be useful and morally improving. Working on Nashe in 2020-1, during the Covid-19 pandemic, brought home quite starkly resonances between Nashe's world and the one we live in today, highlighting the persistence of precarity over a *longue duree*.

The pieces in this special issue take a historical perspective to 'precarity': that is, to be in an extended state of insecurity and vulnerability in relation to employment and living standards. Almost all existing scholarship on precarity has a historical range restricted to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It often departs from the period of 'post-war consensus' in 'the First World', treating that era of relative employment stability as the norm. But that stability was the exception, more than the norm. This point has been well made by comparing the 'First World' 'post-war consensus' with other places, as for example in Sian Lazar's research on modern Bolivia.[2] Our unusually long historical range in this issue makes the same point chronologically. Contributions move between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ([Article 1, Think Piece 1]), through the eighteenth century ([Article 2]), to the twentieth century ([Article 3, Article 4]), and up to the present day ([Article 5, Think Piece 2, Think Piece 3]). The pieces thus explore both a time before the British welfare state provided at least some form of a safety-net, and the aftermath of its diminution (or even dismantling), with the retreat from Keynesian economics (the effect of which on arts funding is detailed by [Article 3]), and the subsequent rise of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on productivity and self-reliance (the impact of which [Article 4] traces in female-authored fiction), the weakening of the Trades

Unions, and the emergence of the 'gig economy', where workers are not even afforded the reliable salary that comes with predictable, regular hours. Nonetheless, despite their chronological range, collectively, these essays explore precarity with an unusually distinctive focus: not only as a socio-economic condition, but also as a set of feelings in response to those conditions. This focus beyond the economic speaks to the intriguing origins of 'precarity' as an analytical term: contrary to understandable assumption, 'precarity' gained traction as a concept *before* the recent Great Recession (from 2008), in European cities like Milan in the early 2000s, the 'high noon' of neoliberalism. Precarity was seen primarily as a problem of excessive uprootedness and hyper-flexibility, rather than lack of economic stability.[3] More recently, theorists such as Judith Butler and Anna Tsing have stressed precarity as at least partly a psychological condition, though not one divorced from economic and political realities.[4]

The topic of precarity is a rich one for a journal such as *English*, because of the ways in which language and literature represent the experience of precarity (as seen in [Article 5]'s exploration of late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century working-class poetry) and because writers and scholars of the Arts and Humanities are themselves frequently in positions of precarity (as is powerfully expressed from a personal perspective in the contributions from [Article 2] and [Think Piece 3]). The image of the impoverished artist in their garret – or 'convers[ing] with scarcitie' like Nashe's persona 'Pierce Penilesse' – has a long cultural tradition, and at times has been presented with a patina of romantic allure (as with the 'Bohemians' in Baz Luhrmann's 2001 *Moulin Rouge!*) that belies the physical and emotional toll of a hand-to-mouth existence.[5] As [Article 5] reminds us, to avoid such 'fairy tales' – or their converse (the 'horror story' of 'poverty, dysfunction, and violence') – we need access to writing that is produced from within that experience, and which is 'witness' to it. The analogous figure of the 'poor scholar' has been less culturally prominent than that of the impoverished artist: ours is an era where an association between higher education and 'ivory towers' can still trip off the tongue of politicians and media commentators, despite the realities of the sector, in which – in Britain at least – numerous institutions are currently facing financial insecurity, Arts and Humanities courses are imperilled, and where large numbers of academics are employed on casual contracts.[6] Yet – as [Think Piece 1] and [Article 2] demonstrate (looking at the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, respectively) – the financially precarious scholar has a long historical tradition.

The socio-economic marginality experienced by scholars – despite the cultural capital that knowledge is assumed to bring – is exacerbated, as inequalities of power invariable are, by their intersections with other aspects of minoritised identities: of class (the impoverished graduate in the Elizabethan drama *Patient Grissil*, discussed by [Think Piece 1]), gender (as with

the eighteenth-century Anglo-Saxonist Elizabeth Elstob, whose story is traced by [Article 2]), or neurodiversity (explored by [Think Piece 3] in relation to twenty-first-century academia). The intersectional nature of precarity is also explored in [Article 4]'s analysis of the ways in which female, working-class characters – including black female characters – in novels by Janice Galloway, Bernardine Evaristo, and Eliza Clark navigate an economic environment which, in the wake of the 'neoliberal turn', fetishishes 'productivity' and self-discipline, often to the detriment of their health and sense of identity. [Think Piece 2]'s reading of the memoir *Small Bodies of Water* by the mixed-race writer and poet Nina Mingya Powles through the lens of Timothy Clark's 'derangements of scale', similarly highlights that, in the Anthropocene, the experience of precarity is not just economic and political, but also environmental. The complexities of these intersections demonstrate that precarity cannot be satisfactorily reduced to the terms of class, of the kind that Guy Standing attempts to define in naming 'the precariat'.[7] Despite the usefulness of Standing's analysis, these essays clearly demonstrate the open-ended nature of precarious experience, and precarity's tendency to crop up in a multitude of surprising situations.

Three essays address the wider structures of the publishing industry, and how writers and publishers negotiate its inherent precarity. [Article 1] examines how late-sixteenth-century 'print agents' deployed the language of community to try to mitigate financial and reputational risk in a highly competitive marketplace. [Article 3], meanwhile, sets the survival of the literary magazine *Wasafiri* within the wider political landscape of arts funding in the final decades of the twentieth century, in which applying for grants (a form of patronage) is as much a part of the job of the editor as curating content. [Article 5], too, situates working-class poetry within the exigencies of a publishing industry which mostly neglects or overlooks this oeuvre, leaving those poets dependent on a handful of independent presses, or on free-to-access websites. The abundant 'mutuality' which sustains this working-class poetry (with 'poets setting up sites so as to publish other poets') demonstrates again the recurrent importance of networks and communities (as seen in [Article 1]), and the ways in which they can provide some protection against precarity. This theme is also found in [Article 2], where Elstob is sustained – be it intellectually or materially – by her brother William, her friend, the antiquarian George Ballard, and her eventual employer, the Duchess of Portland. [Article 3] also traces how in its first two decades *Wasafiri* – a magazine which was established precisely to provide a platform for Black writers excluded from the mainstream literary scene (including its funding opportunities) – relied on the support of loyal subscribers, volunteers, and networks of influentially-placed champions.

The resourcefulness and resilience of editors like *Wasafiri*'s Susheila Nasta caution against reading people who experience precarity as necessarily 'victims' of it: if we are to avoid the 'fairy tale' narrative of triumph over adversity, or the 'horror story' of its converse, like [Article 5]'s working-class poets, it is more helpful to see them as 'witnesses' to it. Precarity can provide a useful perspective, a feature explored by both [Think Piece 1] and [Think Piece 3] in relation to the marginalised scholar, whose position on what [Think Piece 3] calls the 'borderline' allows them to critique the *status quo*, or find 'generative ways of adapting'. Nashe's own experience of living during uncertain periods of epidemic plagues and financial insecurity led him to depict characters who act as 'witnesses' to tough physical, financial, and emotional situations. Nashe's writing frequently confronts his reader with a question which still resonates today: 'what are you going to do about forces which are outside of your control?'

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[1] For more on Thomas Nashe, see the project website: https://research.ncl.ac.uk/thethomasnasheproject/thomasnashe/. An edition of Nashe's works is forthcoming with Oxford University Press. For a digital exhibition which views Nashe in relation to current precarity in the arts and humanities,, see: https://speccollstories.ncl.ac.uk/digital-thomas-nashe/

[2] Sian Lazar and Andrew Sanchez, 'Understanding Labour Politics in an Age of Precarity', *Dialectical Anthropology* 43 (2019), 3-14.

[3] Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception', *Theory, Culture and Society* 25 (2008), 51-72.

[4] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[5] Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse, His Supplication to the Divell* (London: Abell Jeffes for J[ohn] B[usby], 1592), sig. A1r.

[6] See, for example, 'No more ivory towers, universities are told', *The Times* (28.7.2009); Kristal Brent Zook, 'Academics: leave your ivory towers and pitch your work to the media', *The Guardian* (23.0.2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/sep/23/academics-leave-your-ivory-towers-and-pitch-your-work-to-the-media>; Hannah Rose Woods, 'Universities are in crisis', *The New Statesman* (8.4.2024), <https://www.newstatesman.com/comment/2024/04/university-funding-is-in-crisis>; Glen O'Hara, 'Saving humanities', *Research Professional News* (25.2.204), <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-uk-views-of-the-uk-2024-february-saving-humanities/>; University and College Union, *Precarious Work in Higher Education* (first published 2019), <Layout 1 (ucu.org.uk)https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10899/Precarious-work-in-higher-education-May-20/pdf/ucu_he-precarity-report_may20.pdf>.

[7] Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). For Standing's defence of his original definition of the precariat as a class - 'new' and not yet a 'class for itself', in Marxist terms, but nevertheless a class - see Guy Standing, 'Rescuing the Concept of Precarity', *Social Europe* (2021), https://www.socialeurope.eu/rescuing-the-concept-of-precarity.