**Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear friends!**

I must begin by thanking those who have made it possible for me, almost incredibly, to come from the midst of a cruel war to this peaceful and joyous celebration. So I thank the kind Pragnell family, who have enabled me to be here; and I thank the University of Birmingham, especially its Shakespeare Institute, who have sponsored my visa.

I have the honour to represent here my native country, Ukraine, which is currently experiencing the most dramatic period of its centuries-long history, and whose sacrificial heroism will determine what the future of the world will look like. It is there, so far away from this elegant marquee, in the half-ruined but still defiant Ukrainian cities, and in the wiped-out Ukrainian villages that have been surprised, like Macduff’s castle, by a tyrant, that the question of whether our civilisation is to be or not to be is being decided right now, at this very moment.

On behalf of my country, I am here to thank, above all the other inhabitants of this blessed town, past and present, William Shakespeare. By appealing to our emotions and aesthetic sensations, our critical thinking and the subconscious, Shakespeare’s poetic genius is today not only transmitting eternal values but also inspiring their defence. The generous plurality and freedom of expression supremely exemplified in the contents of the First Folio, 400 years old this year, are under threat in 2023 as never before. Today, Ukraine is fighting not only for its own future and independence. We are fighting for the free civilization which Shakespeare has helped shape. We are fighting for life and love, freedom and dignity, honour and goodness, for the right to be.

Who am I? I am a mother, whose son, like thousands of other Ukrainian people, is at the frontline today. He is fighting for our freedom, and for yours too. I am a grandmother whose grandchildren are forced to hide from Russian cruise missiles in the basement of the kindergarten and the school bomb shelter several times a day. I am a university professor whose online lectures are interrupted daily by air raid warnings, and whose students can tell by ear exactly what has come flying from the northern neighbour: S-300 missiles, Shaheds, missiles of the "Calibre" type, or Kinzhals.

I am the head of the Ukrainian Shakespeare Centre, which has kept on working throughout the war – staging performances, teaching students, and organizing symposia, even when these have had to take place by hand-held torchlight in bomb shelters. Our members know that Shakespeare has always been part of our country’s long history of resistance to oppression. Ukrainian translations of Shakespeare were banned under the Tsars; our great modernist director of Shakespeare, Les Kurbas, was shot under the Soviets; our great poet Dmytro Palamarchuk completed his Ukrainian rendition of the Sonnets in one of Stalin’s labour camps. But Ukrainians have defiantly performed *Hamlet* in their own language from the 19th century to the 21st, and despite the opposition of the Kremlin we published a Ukrainian translation of the entire Complete Works even in 1986.

The current war has only made that Shakespearean resistance more determined. The underground Shakespearean theatre in Ivano Frankivsk is now an air-raid shelter, but it is still performing. The Shakespearean directors Oleksiy Kravchuk and Ihor Zadnipryanyi, along with Andruy Petruk, the first Ukrainian actor to play Florizel, are now in uniform at the front, to name only three. But in spring 2023 their compatriots are attending productions of *Richard III*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and our students are as passionate about their great English colleague as always.

On behalf of my people, I thank the Government of the United Kingdom for its powerful support. I thank Stratford District Council and the Town Hall for flying my country’s flag. I thank the RSC for staging a concert in support of my country. I thank the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust for lighting up the playwright’s childhood home in the colours of our flag. I thank those here who have given shelter to our refugees, and donations towards our cause. I thank all of you, dear friends, for your sincere prayers and ceaseless help. As Le Beau says in *As You Like It*, ‘Hereafter in a better world than this, I shall desire more love and knowledge of you.’ But for now, before I return to the war, I thank above all the man of Stratford whom I regard as our greatest shared asset and our greatest ally. If you will raise your glasses with me, I give you the toast: To the Immortal Memory of William Shakespeare.

Professor Nataliya Torkut

Stratford-upon-Avon, April 22 2023