

"Stars Down to Earth: Materializing Celebrity"

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I'm grateful to our hosts here at the Folger Shakespeare Library for inviting me to speak on the occasion of the year-long program "The Wonder of Will," which has marked the observance of the 400th anniversary of the Bard's passing. And I'm also grateful to my colleagues Kristina Straub and Janine Barchas for curating the wonderful exhibition now on view in the Great Hall right next door, combining the resources of the Folger and of Goucher College: *Will & Jane: Shakespeare, Austen, and the Cult of Celebrity*, which anticipates the approaching bicentenary of Jane Austen's passing, which will be commemorated with her debut on the 10-pound note.

Speaking of currency, as in keeping current, keeping up, keeping present in the now, this exhibit, I think, is a masterstroke by the curators and the Folger staff. Their coup is to have realized and acted on the realization that the literary celebrities of Shakespeare and Austen, quite beyond the coincidence of their anniversaries coming up at 400 and 200 years, stand apart from all other celebrity authors in English literature. Their stars shine with greater brightness. Their fame generates more extensive and resilient fandom. Their works are revered with a more intensive devotion from readers and audiences alike. Their only rival, with the possible exception of Charles Dickens, is one another. And allowing for Will's 200-year head start, Jane shows signs of closing the gap with dramatic and cinematic adaptations—such as the well-reviewed production of *Sense and Sensibility* right here at the Folger (we're looking at the set as I speak), currently running—narrowing Shakespeare's natural generic advantage, which is the punctual reembodyment of his characters by charismatic actors on stage and screen.

That we know Will and Jane by their first names, as we do stars like Cher and Oprah, and princesses like Kate and Diana, is testimony to what the curators call "public intimacy." The fact that these authorial identities circulate familiarly in the absence of their persons gives us a good working definition of "celebrity." Other celebrated authors do not quite clear the high bar of public intimacy set by Will and Jane. If I say Charles, you might not automatically think of Dickens. George, probably not of Eliot. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf. Celebrated as they are, and rightly so, they're just not the same as Will and Jane. Why is that?

My purpose tonight is to think out loud about some of the reasons for the phenomenon of Shakespeare's and Austen's specialness in the hearts of readers and even, it must be said, non-readers, who, though they may not have experienced the works directly or recently, are able to recognize the authors' names, their portraits, the titles of their

works, their characters, and even some of their words from the pervasive circulation that they have, and continual repetition over time, in popular culture.

If any evidence of that continuity over time and pervasiveness across space were needed, it would be found right here at the Folger in *Will & Jane*. In this show, literary celebrity is materialized, and paradoxically, at the same time, mystified, by the dizzying variety of works on paper or canvas, on glass or plastic, porcelain, and wood, and of course, on linen, as in the instance of the rampantly fetishized shirt worn by Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy in the 1995 BBC *Pride and Prejudice*. Yes, "whoa!" I heard that!

Here is the man himself, or his plastic image, in the Serpentine, as though it's somehow already taken over from Jane Austen on the 10-pound note, before Jane Austen even gets there. And here, Austen's famous words: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," is rudely interrupted by "phwoar"—an Anglicism, my Google dictionary tells me, expressing strong approval of someone's sexiness. Austen's original novel contained no such swimming scene, and therefore no such shirt, and certainly no "phwoar," at least as I remember. But now in the throbbing hearts of many, it somehow does and probably always will, a wet-look apotheosis of cultural kink, apparently thought by some to be worthy of its own commemoration on a 10-pound note.

And the predilection to add to, to read into, and adapt and embellish scenes in Shakespeare and Austen, where they don't exist in the original, is one of the themes that I'm going to develop tonight in my talk.

My talk is in five parts: on method, the "two martini rule"; the English constitution; controlling the sign; character, action, and word; and the stars come down to earth. But don't be alarmed. These are short sections. We'll do 40 minutes and change and when we get to Part 5, "the stars come down to earth," we'll be two minutes from the end.

So, number 1: On method, the two martini rule.

All of us who write scholarship—we do so, writing scholarship, from the perspective of our own disciplines. Mine is the history of theater and popular culture, popular performance especially, the evidence for which vanishes almost without a trace at the moment of its iteration. My methodological problem therefore is to adduce history from that "almost."

Not everyone would agree that this is doing history in any serious way at all. In fact, at a prospectus defense not too long ago, one of my doctoral advisees announced that he had discovered the urgent need to add a real historian to the committee in order to remedy the self-evident deficiency of the incumbent. Feeling sorry for myself over drinks afterwards, I could point out that theater history, like the ephemera and objects of popular material culture on view in *Will & Jane*, is a kind of history.

It is a history neither of war nor diplomacy nor revolutions nor reigns, but the history of how we represent the compelling power over us of what we cannot otherwise satisfactorily explain—in this case, literary genius so exhaustive in its comprehensiveness that it defies comprehension. Even though the vividly populated world achieved by Austen's novels is self-evidently a smaller one than the multiple worlds within a great, vast, larger, overarching world of Shakespeare's plays, it is still too large in its uncanny psychological acuity and ambient social prescience to be contained within the compass of normal imaginations.

So, we represent it in other ways—in our literary criticism and biographies, of course, but also in little things that we can hold in our hands, like bobblehead dolls, or wear on our backs, like T-shirts. And here I cite the remarkable Stone Cold Jane Austen, also known as Devoney Looser, who is with us this evening, who has taken Jane to the roller derby circuit. And I just love this so much, because in this day, the arts and humanities really need sharp-elbowed advocacy—and they have to be not only online, but in-line, going forward. And of course, Devoney is the author of a number of books, including *Jane Austen and the Discourses of Feminism* and has worked on a project now, *The Making of Jane Austen, 1870-1975*, from which I have learned much.

This, I want to claim, is a kind of history and maybe a more important one than some would allow. But I have found that even in my own readiness, as well as that of real historians, to accept the validity of this proposition, sometimes that readiness depends on what I call the "two martini rule." One is not quite enough. Three is one too many.

Sometime, considerably after the first martini, but before the end of the second, experience shows that I might get the chance with a real historian to make two main points, if only to cheer myself up. And just maybe, just maybe, if the cocktail works, its hoped-for charms sneak them past my now goofily smiling interlocutor.

My first point is that the most humble or even abject items of material culture—take stage properties, for instance—can speak eloquently about history, if we will only listen carefully to what they have to tell us. That is because their power to symbolize belies their apparent lack of inherent use value or even their exchange value on any market but that of the imagination. In my own practice as a stage director, respect for the objects of material culture continually informs the details of my productions, such as the *Richard III* straight that I directed for Yale College Theater in 2013. Shortly after, the malformed skeleton of the historical Richard pushed its way up through the asphalt of a Leicester carpark, like the return of the repressed.

Theatrical tradition, backed by Shakespeare's implied stage directions, affirms that Richard carries a small dagger constantly on his person, as seen here at the bloody denouement of Act 5. The dagger has come in handy for Richard in many ways. It is his sinister weapon of choice, metonymically standing in for his character, like Brecht's

Mack the Knife. In Act 3, Scene 1, Shakespeare himself provides the documentation when Richard says in an aside, celebrating his own duplicity and murderous intent:

Richard: Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity,
I moralize two meanings in one word.
(*Richard III*, 3.1.83–84)

The Vice was a stock character in medieval morality plays. He entertained audiences with witty banter and shameless menace. He was never seen without his dagger. Richard toying with the dagger, a stage tradition that I respect, proudly claims Iniquity as kin, hence the intensified frisson when the young prince asks his murderous uncle to see the weapon and Richard replies with a smile,

Richard: My dagger, little cousin? With all my heart.
(*Richard III*, 3.1.113)

I will return to the ill-fated princes when I talk about the special Shakespearean powers of character, action, and word.

Meanwhile, let me point out that a number of real historians have been defeated in their efforts to rescue a kinder, gentler historical Richard from Shakespeare, who unforgettably dramatized him as evil itself. Richard's apologists, known as the Ricardians, accuse Shakespeare of blindly following Sir Thomas More's Tudor hatchet job. But the skeleton that came up from the carpark confounded the apologists. The bones bore the forensic evidence of many savage stab wounds made on the corpse—not on the living body, but on the corpse—new evidence that it was not only Sir Thomas More who had an ax to grind.

At the very least, no shadow of doubt remains, *pace* Ricardians, that Richard's spine curved from the waist in a severe hump. Stage tradition, not flattering portraits touted by apologists, some real historians among them, carried this fact from the 15th century forward to the present as part of a living repertoire.

The metonymical property dagger, however, needs no exhumation, even though it humbly waited, dulled for safety's sake, and scored with many blows over time, in the Yale property room weapons chest, to do its vital symbolic work. Richard not only toys with it and wields it in deadly earnest—he is the dagger.

My second point, the hope for a clincher, which I tactically deploy as the level of the second martini reaches the olive, is that theater occasionally makes real history itself, materializing it for audiences by its own expressive means, especially so during an age of revolution and counter-revolution. And what age isn't an age of that?

Let me quickly highlight a few examples. Consider, for instance, the consummately tactless revival of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, including the harrowing and treasonous deposition scene, by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, during the Essex Rebellion against Queen Elizabeth in 1601, which got them in deep trouble—and then, by Nahum Tate at the height of the Exclusion Crisis against Charles II and James in 1681. In such instances, onstage performances may excite offstage behaviors that expand scenarios beyond the confines of the theater, even as they highlight the importance of what goes on inside of it.

Such meta- or paratheatrical performances, especially those derived from Shakespeare, have entered into the practice of everyday life, as non-actors find occasion to conduct conversation and lines taken from the plays—as Jane Austen's characters do in *Mansfield Park* and many people still do today—or even carry out scenes that consciously or unconsciously mimic those enacted by Shakespeare's characters. Imprisoned before his elaborately staged and well-attended execution in 1649, King Charles I read Shakespeare's histories for solace and perhaps a prompt: "sad stories of the death of kings."

In 1665, Samuel Pepys, the unforgettable diarist, cited Hamlet's "to be or not to be" soliloquy on the occasion of an especially memorable wet dream that he had ardently hoped to be able to dream again, even after his death. Pepys writes, "What a happy thing it would be if, when we are in our graves, as Shakespeare resembles it, we could dream and dream such dreams as this."

In 1809, John Kemble revived *Coriolanus* in a doomed bid to suppress mob rule by shouting classist insults over the din of the jeering crowd during the Old Price Riots, in the process subjecting his managerial incumbency to exactly the rebellion of "the belly" he had imperiously tried to forestall. Then, in 1824, in pre-abolition Jamaica, some of the brilliantly costumed actor boys, like Koo-Koo, the Actor Boy, used the topsy-turvy of John Canoe Christmas revels to turn the tables on their white masters. They acted out a pointedly upside-down version of *Richard III*, in which Richard, the masked and smiling anti-hero in fancy dress, but refigured as the Afro diasporic trickster figure Eshu-Elegba, wins the battle of Bosworth Field. That settles that historical point.

And then, finally, in 1865, John Wilkes Booth, after rehearsing assassinations for years on stage with his brothers Junius and Edwin, reappeared in Ford's Theatre, not far from here, for his final performance in that genre.

For better or worse, these are actions a man or woman might play, and their documentable recurrence on so many occasions, momentous and quotidian, suggests that cultural history has a place in real history writ large. If further persuasion be needed, visit *Will & Jane*. Still not convinced, buy me a drink.

The English constitution.

Perhaps we can agree without contention, or at least without a martini, that the English constitution is the most important public document never to have been written. In the absence of a written constitution, I believe popular culture in general, and the theater and narrative fiction in particular, are especially useful in the conduct of the public sphere that operates between state institutions and private life. Civil society needs such broadly accessible community rituals and representations to assert its continuity and coherence.

After Richard Steele attended the burial of the great Shakespearean tragedian Thomas Betterton in Westminster Abbey in 1710, he commended in particular the propriety of the actor's deportment on stage as exemplary for all Britons in the conduct of national life. Quoting Sir Richard Steele:

There is no human invention so aptly calculated for the forming of a freeborn people as that of the theater. [Isn't that beautiful? Let me say it again.] There is no human invention so aptly calculated for the forming of a freeborn people as that of the theater.

In modern Britain, as in ancient Athens, sovereign authorities not only sponsored theatrical performances on officially sanctioned stages of a national theater, producing the works of their greatest dramatist, but they have also mirrored those theatrical actions on the fractious stages of mixed government, enacting the conflict of checks and balances among tyranny, oligarchy, and democracy. Witness *House of Cards*.

Astringently surveying British polity over the long term in *The English Constitution*, written in 1867, Victorian political theorist Walter Bagehot stresses the importance of putting on a good show. He plays off the symbolic role of what he calls the visible form of government, which consists of a few glamorous people doing interesting things, against the efficient form, which consists of many practical people doing boring things. The first form is charismatic. The second, bureaucratic. But each has its role to play in exercising the power of an unwritten constitution.

The apparent rulers of the English nation [Bagehot writes] are like the imposing personages of a splendid procession: it is by them that the mob are influenced; it is they whom the spectators cheer. The real rulers are secreted in second-class carriages; no one cares for them or asks about them, but they are obeyed implicitly and unconsciously by reason of the splendor of those who eclipsed and preceded them [end quote].

In the light of Bagehot's *English Constitution*, I believe that it is the role of authors like Will and Jane to supply the public imagination with vivid characters and situations in the service of imagined community. That purpose is to provide for the general public the most "imposing personages in a splendid procession." It is to make visible the

predicaments and passions of subjects and citizens that may otherwise remain invisible even to themselves. Drama and narrative fiction instruct them, in other words, how to be subjects and citizens in their intimate lives, as well as in their public ones, if their imaginations would have it so.

In Austen's romance plots, for instance, marriageable bodies passing through the most scrupulously regulated social spaces imaginable seek their erotic fates. Those fates encompass the social spectrum, refracted through the prism of Austen's extraordinary powers of observation. As the title character in *Emma*, for instance, gazes down the main street in her village, the scene comes to life as a microcosm of Englishness, regulated by received relations of class and gender and the behaviors that signal cooperative acquiescence to them.

Emma's view of the shopkeepers and tradesmen of Highbury, animated by two dogs fighting over a bone and children lingering over a gingerbread in the baker's window, moderately amuses her.

A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer [Austen omnisciently comments].

Then suddenly, the social stakes are raised by a new entrance.

She looked down the Randalls road. The scene enlarged; two persons appeared; Mrs. Weston and her son-in-law; they were walking into Highbury;—to Hartfield of course. They were stopping, however, in the first place at Mrs. Bates's; whose house was a little nearer Randalls than Ford's; and had all but knocked, when Emma caught their eye.—Immediately they crossed the road and came forward to her; and the agreeableness of yesterday's engagement seemed to give fresh pleasure to the present meeting [quoting Jane Austen].

Austen's novel provides useful materials toward the reconstruction of a kind of ballet of provincial social life, a Regency rite of spring, if you will. In the middle distance, the figures of the picturesque genre scene, the Hogarthian workers and lower-class children described as "nothing," are painted on the scenery. The character dancers briefly enact the inane but inconsequential comic roles of tradesmen and professionals. When the marriageable gentry enter on their diurnal rounds, however, "the scene enlarge[s]." They alone exist as wholly visible persons. Their movements are purposive, their destinations sure, their social, as well as their physical, self-mastery complete.

Taking the stage, they fill Emma's vision and the reader's imagination with movement and meaning, while the novel itself, taking down steps, notates an unwritten constitution, the restored behavior of appropriate selection that ensures the continuity of a certain kind of social contract.

And what of Shakespeare in this regard? Here I can cite an example that needs no martini to influence your judgment to accept the self-evident probative value. I merely need to ask you where you are. You are in the Folger Shakespeare Library, purpose-built a stone's throw from the judicial and legislative branches as an extraconstitutional, privately endowed department at the heart of the federal district.

In sum, under the provisions of an unwritten but powerful cultural constitution, Will and Jane serve in the executive branch of visible government in the United States, as well as the United Kingdom. But in the absence of explicitly written provisions, what precisely is their job description?

The United States, of course, experiences the blessings of a written constitution as well as its limitations. One of those important, but historically contentious, limitations is the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, prohibiting Congress from enacting laws establishing official religion or interfering with "the free exercise" of any religion.

But religious feeling, if not ordained religious practice, is important to many citizens. And even as the enlightened framers moved to limit its relationships with government, they recognized that they were writing the Constitution in the context of a deep cultural struggle over what I'm calling here the "control of the sign"—that is, the sign of authority, cohesion, mutual obligation, mutual connection, once provided by religion and still necessary under representative government in order to form a more perfect union.

In the struggle for the control of the sign during the Enlightenment, thinkers embraced alternatives to former religious observances provided to secular society by the arts, which lent themselves to communication by means of an emergent mass culture.

Enter David Garrick, the greatest Shakespearean actor of his time and perhaps of all time, who made his debut in 1741 as Richard III. As the curators note, and the exhibition demonstrates, Garrick pioneered the mass marketing of Shakespeare as a quasi-divinity, "the God of our idolatry," quoted by Kristina in her introduction. Those are Garrick's own words.

The discerning German visitor to England, Georg Christoph von Lichtenberg, writing from London in 1775 on the occasion of having seen Garrick act Shakespeare, observed that the English public had conferred a kind of national sainthood on the Bard, whose verses they committed to memory and recited in the place of prayers.

In this island [the astonished German remarked] Shakespeare is not only famous, but holy; his moral maxims are everywhere. . . . [H]is name is entwined with the most solemn thoughts; people sing of him and from his works, and thus a large number of English children know him [by heart] before they have learnt their ABCs or [their Apostle's] creed.

Perhaps I am doing nothing more for theater history and popular culture here than claiming for them what Coleridge called the "willing suspension of disbelief . . . which constitutes poetic faith."

But when you think of it, that's a lot. When Garrick acted Lear, Parliament adjourned. After seeing his farewell performance in this role, Hannah More wrote of him,

Surely, He is above Mortality.—Is it possible He can be Subject to Pain, Disease, & Death, like *other* Men?—And must those refulgent Eyes be ever clos'd in Night? Must those exquisite Powers be suspended, & that Silver Tongue be Stopp'd? His Talents are capacious beyond human credibility [end quote].

Even before his death, in other words, Garrick has proven his immortality, but surely what has happened here is that Hannah More, along with many of her contemporaries and theatergoers ever since, down to the present day, has come to understand that the Shakespearean actor, like medieval kings, has two bodies.

The first, the body natural, is subject to time. It is flesh and blood. It is perishable. The second, the body politic, is, as More put it, "above Mortality." That body belongs to the authors of "character, action, and word."

The special power of Austen and Shakespeare, possessed by both in different ways, but by them alone in the highest degree, is stated by Hamlet in his advice to the players.

Hamlet: Suit the action to the
word, the word to the action, with this special
observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of
nature.
(*Hamlet*, 3.2.18–21)

The gift to achieve this consistently and extensively in many works is not the gift for writing poetry or incisive narrative prose alone, though it does contain that. It is the gift to align the persona of the character to the action he or she performs in the given circumstances, especially under the duress of decision, with the words he or she then speaks.

In the novel, Austen expands this capacity to the representation of unspoken thought, through the convention of free indirect discourse, developing into, and more familiarly known as, stream of consciousness narrative.

Each, in his or her distinctive way, represents not only the way human beings act, but the way they think and feel, the uncanny illusion of consciousness and unconsciousness at work in living minds, impelling them to speak and to act.

Returning to a detail of Hogarth's great portrait of *Garrick as Richard III*, in his tent on the eve of battle at Bosworth Field, a scene that survives in Shakespeare's version, even in Cibber's adaptation—the heavily revised text that Garrick used, and even Laurence Olivier had recourse to in his famous 1955 film. Immortalizing a moment of consummately aligned character, action, and word, Hogarth captures Garrick's embodiment of Shakespeare's guilty tyrant as he awakens in horror from the nightmare he has been dreaming, into the nightmare that he is living. After the stage direction, "*Richard starteth up out of a dream*," between sleeping and waking, he gasps prophetically:

Richard: Give me another horse! Bind up my wounds!
Have mercy, Jesu!—Soft, I did but dream.
(*Richard III*, 5.3.189–190)

As the plentitude of *Will & Jane* makes clear, print world distribution through relatively inexpensive reproductions made such images more widely available to an expanding public. Likewise, the collectibles, such as the Staffordshire earthenware figure after Hogarth—though I must say here, that Richard III looks less like he is starting in horror, and more like he is waving royally to his fans, which tells another story. Garrick and Shakespeare's runaway celebrity motivated the creation of competing reproductions of many kinds, such as the mezzotint by John Dixon, after the portrait by Nathaniel Dance of 1772, followed by the iconic porcelain figure modeled by John Bacon, several iterations of which appear in *Will & Jane*, with subsequent actors Kemble and Kean in the same role as well, but different actors.

But it is not only the onstage scenes that Shakespeare created and the actors revived that lived on in the imaginations of the public. And this is where whether they happened in the play, or people thought they happened in the play, becomes almost immaterial.

Some offstage scenes were so vividly evoked by the alignment of character, action, and word that they took on a life of their own. Such was the scene of the two princes confined by Richard in the Tower of London and murdered there by his orders. We have in Act 4, Scene 3, Richard's henchman Tyrrel's secondhand account of his hired assassins smothering the boys in their beds.

Victorian painters outdid one another in rendering the terror and pathos of the moment, just before the murderers enter the chamber—a scene not in Shakespeare's play, but brought into imaginative fullness of being in the play of his evocative dramaturgy on the minds of artists and the beholders of their pictures, such as Paul Delaroche's creepy *Edward V and the Duke of York in the Tower* of 1831. It shows the moment when the little dog, the only protection the princes have, has just heard a suspicious noise from the unseen door in the darkness beyond the bed. Now I identify that dog as a Charles II spaniel, which is wildly anachronistic, but it does remind us that in the reign of Charles II,

two skeletons were found buried under a staircase in the Tower of London, two skeletons of young boys.

Then there is Charles Leslie's sentimental *The Two Princes in the Tower* of 1837, with much younger boys, innocent and unsuspecting, kneeling in prayer.

But finally, there is John Everett Millais's masterpiece, *The Princes in the Tower* of 1878. The boys, lost in a dungeonlike cellar, not a bed or tapestry in sight, hear the noise of footsteps coming down the stairs. Facing outward, the staircase at their backs, they cannot see what we cannot miss, the ominous shadow cast on the curved wall by the figure that is descending to them as they clasp their hands in pathetic solidarity against the darkness and the terror. Many viewers of this picture identified the misshapen shadow as belonging to Richard himself. That makes emotional sense, even though neither the play nor the historical record provides any warrant for it. Richard, newly crowned but insecurely so, as long as the legitimate and direct heirs to the throne live, suborns others to do his heinous deed.

But the exasperated order with which he finally charges the Duke of Buckingham to undertake the murder of the princes offers one of those epitomizing "character, action, word" moments in Shakespeare—this one in flat prose, devoid of poetic or rhetorical ornament, spoken by an agitated King Richard after Buckingham has stolidly refused again and again to take his subtle hints about what he's supposed to do, captured in spirit by the chiaroscuro of the painters. This line suddenly, shockingly illuminates the scene like a jagged fork of lightning on a pitch dark night.

Richard: Shall I be plain? I wish the bastards dead
(*Richard III*, 4.2.20)

A much gentler, but no less compelling, scene builder, Jane Austen creates a comparable moment of plainspoken alignment of character, action, and word in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth Bennet hears the marriage proposal of the egregious Mr. Collins, as we see Keira Knightley as Elizabeth in the 2005 film version. The clergyman Collins, Elizabeth's cousin, who stands to inherit whatever fortune the poor family possesses, has just proposed to her in the most self-satisfied and condescending way, oleagiously assuring her that she will never hear a word of reproach from him that she comes penniless to their union. Spirited and strong-willed and strong-minded, Elizabeth refuses him on the spot.

But then, like Buckingham in *Richard III*, Collins will simply not hear what she is saying, allowing Austen to show her character incrementally, but emphatically, in words that are deeds, in the sense of "speech acts"—making something happen, or in this case, making something not happen. After a torturous back and forth, wherein he keeps insisting that Elizabeth, obviously to him, disabled by some sort of feminine modesty or

silliness or coyness, must not know her mind, must not know her heart, she really lets him have it.

I thank you again and again for the honor you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it. Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female, intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart.

Spoken perfectly in character at a climax of the action, the moment of decision, and with apposite words.

"Stars down to earth." Two minutes, I promise.

So why is it that the adoring public, which is us, even as we revel in Will's and Jane's celebrity, seems to want somehow, some way, to bring both of them down to earth to denigrate them, as well as to adore them?

There's a long tradition that I won't engage here, except to note its persistence over 150 years or more, of trying to prove that Shakespeare didn't write Shakespeare's plays or poems. Recently, Jane Austen, or the novelist formerly known as Jane Austen, has been the subject of a similarly skeptical book-length inquiry.

More prominently, her novels have also been rewritten to include new characters. Zombies, for instance. Austen herself seems to be suspected of zombiehood.

I confess to enjoying camp humor myself, I enjoy it a lot, but the public response on old and new media when the Bank of England announced that Austen would replace Darwin on the 10-pound note was really disturbing. She was attacked for her character, [quote] "a bitchy marriage broker who never married" [end quote], her purview, [quote] "a sneering chronicler of petty squabbles and small lives" [end quote], and her appearance. She looked, one critic said, "like a peevish hamster." Others objected to what they said were "her gloopy eyes and mean mouth."

We might easily chalk this up to garden-variety misogyny; there's plenty of that going around. But let it be remembered that Shakespeare has also suffered abuse from the very beginning—Robert Greene's "upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers" of 1592. Not to mention literary trashings across the century by Voltaire and Tolstoy, among others.

Indeed, even the actors who made their livings from the roles he provided manifested ambivalent and even violent feelings toward him. In William Heath's graphic satire *Rival Richards* of 1814, the romantic superstar Edmund Kean of Drury Lane plays tug of war with his rival as Richard III, C.M. Young of Covent Garden, each pulling one of Shakespeare's arms as the Bard cries, "Murder, Murder."

Contemplating the murder of Shakespeare and the zombification of Austen, let me conclude with this thought. At a time of the coarsening of our public discourse, Will and Jane, as public figures widely recognized for the sheer human scope and depth of their works, might serve to remind us that we have more in common to unite us in our hopes and values, than differences to break us asunder and drive us irretrievably apart.

So if we bring the stars down to earth, let it be to keep them alive for the next century mark, and century marks after that.

So, vote for Will. Vote for Jane, but by all means, vote.