

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Paul Cantor, University of Virginia

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Part I

I: Shakespearean Beginnings (0:15 – 7:04)

KRISTOL: I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to the next in our series of CONVERSATIONS. We have with us today, Paul Cantor, who I've known for many years, and I'm thrilled to have him as a guest.

He's a Professor of Literature at the University of Virginia. I took his course, I think, in the English department, when I was an undergraduate and when he was a young assistant professor at Harvard many decades ago. At the time he had already done important work on Shakespeare and continued that work for the next three, four decades. So we're going to talk about Shakespeare. Paul, welcome.

CANTOR: Thanks for having me here.

KRISTOL: Good to have you. So, how did you get interested in Shakespeare? I guess everyone's sort of interested in Shakespeare, if you're an English professor, but you distinctively –

CANTOR: I feel I was destined to study Shakespeare because my mother was born on April 23rd and that's Shakespeare's birthday too.

KRISTOL: Is it really Shakespeare's birthday, or is that one of those legends? Do we know that?

CANTOR: Well, now, you know it's based on the fact – I think he was baptized on April 26th, so they usually waited three days to see if the kid would live. And since he did die on April 23 in 1616, they kind of – April 23 is his accepted birthday.

And I really come from a literary family. My mother had an M.A. in English from Cornell. She used to take me to Shakespeare plays. My grandfather had a Ph.D. in English. My brother was very interested in literature, so I grew up – my father collected books. I grew up in a house with all sorts of Shakespeare books around.

And then I was taken particularly to Stratford, Connecticut, which in those days had a wonderful Shakespeare theater. I remember particularly seeing Morris Carnovsky playing *King Lear*. It was so good we went to it twice. I would go to Shakespeare in the Park. I grew up in Brooklyn, so as long as I can remember – I remember loving Shakespeare.

KRISTOL: But you decided to actually study Shakespeare and to study it in a distinctive way. So how did that happen?

CANTOR: Well, I started in the ninth grade in what was then called junior high school. Our ninth-grade project was *Julius Caesar*. It's kind of funny because the Roman plays play such a great role in my life, and it all began with our – I was just amazed at *Julius Caesar*. That was the first time I sat down and read a Shakespeare play carefully and then that led me to the other Roman plays. And by my senior year in high school, I wrote a long paper on *King Lear*.

But it really was my experience at Harvard that changed things for me. And it's odd because it wasn't so much through the English department as through the political science department from a man whom we both know, Harvey Mansfield.

I met him in my junior year and I had joined a reading group he was doing. But I took a course he gave – the spring semester of 1965, called Government 112C. It was a course on comparative government. It compared the Greek polis, the Roman Republic, 18th-century British monarchy, and the American Revolutionary government.

And that's when I first learned about Polybius, Machiavelli, Livy, all these things about ancient Rome and one of the supplementary readings was Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. So, I was already interested in the play and I wrote a paper for Harvey on that topic and that was really the start of things. That's when I understood that it was important to take into account the political dimensions of the play.

The key thing in the course was the classical idea of the regime: different forms of government shape different kinds of people and I understood that that was fundamental to Shakespeare, that his Romans were different from his Englishmen and in fact his Republican Romans are different from his Imperial Romans.

KRISTOL: So politics is central to Shakespeare though he's not of course thought of primarily as a political author in any narrow sense. I mean you saw that early on.

CANTOR: Yes, junior year in college. That's pretty early.

KRISTOL: And then you wrote your senior thesis I think on –

CANTOR: *King Lear*.

KRISTOL: But then at graduate school you wrote about the Roman plays?

CANTOR: Yes, my dissertation, which became my first book, *Shakespeare's Rome*, was on *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, with some stuff on *Julius Caesar*.

KRISTOL: So, when you think about Shakespeare the way you do – give us a slight overview – then we'll talk about the Roman plays and other categories of plays and obviously these plays deserve detailed interpretation in their own right. And then every line can be interpreted.

But stepping back, I don't think most studies of Shakespeare really approach it this way, thinking about Shakespeare's kind of universe as different – his reflections on different regimes. I think that's really been key to your work.

CANTOR: Yeah, and I was very inspired by the work of Allan Bloom and Harry Jaffa, particularly the book they did, *Shakespeare's Politics*, which coincidentally came out in 1965 when I first started working on this with Harvey Mansfield.

I put it this way: everybody talks about the wide diversity of human types in Shakespeare. That's something he's generally credited with and I like to connect that diversity with the diversity of regimes he looks at.

I think Shakespeare understood that not all human types are available at all times. So, for example, he's very aware of how living in a pagan republic as his characters do in *Coriolanus* is very different from living in a Christian monarchy as, say, his characters do in his history plays.

A simple issue is suicide – I guess suicide is not so simple an issue to be thinking about – but it's a simple way of making this contrast that when Shakespeare sets a play in a Christian land suicide is forbidden. It's after all almost the first thing Hamlet says, "had not the Everlasting fixed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter."

Suicide is a very difficult issue for Hamlet because his religion forbids it. On the other hand at the end of the play when Horatio wants to join Hamlet in suicide, the way he says it is: "I'm more an antique Roman than a Dane," by which he's saying I believe in the Roman view where suicide is the honorable thing to do in certain circumstances.

And in a play like *Julius Caesar* the characters are more or less lining up at the end of the play to commit suicide, who could do it first. That shows you that here's a very serious human issue and yet people approach it very differently depending upon the regime they live under and that's what I've tried to explore in Shakespeare's plays and, again, suggesting that he's able to portray a different kind of human being in, say, *Coriolanus* because he's portraying a different regime, which means a different set of fundamental beliefs, different attitudes, different options in life.

II: The Settings of Shakespeare's Plays (7:04 – 11:39)

KRISTOL: Just to step back for a second and outline it for people, so there were the Roman plays, which themselves have a progression through regimes. *Coriolanus*, which is set in old Rome, I guess.

CANTOR: The Republic. In fact, for the Roman plays what I study is the change in regime. *Coriolanus* is the beginnings of the republic and *Antony and Cleopatra* portrays the beginnings of the empire, and *Julius Caesar* portrays the transition when the republic turns into an empire.

KRISTOL: And then there are the English plays, which are what, ten history plays?

CANTOR: Ten history plays, yes.

KRISTOL: And that is Shakespeare's – I'm just speaking very broadly – we'll get back to this – but Shakespeare's attempt to do what, do more than just telling Englishmen a nice account of their history.

CANTOR: Yeah, I mean, they are a study of kingship. I think it's an attempt on Shakespeare's part to portray what a bad king is and what a good king is. Unfortunately bad kings are more available than good

kings.

And, again, he studies a progression there where he actually is showing the emergence of the modern British monarchy out of the medieval conditions.

KRISTOL: And then some of the other famous plays, *Macbeth*, *Lear*, *Hamlet*, they're set in different places. Most of the time someone like me goes to one of these plays; you think it's just an accident it's in Scotland or it's in Denmark, but I take it you would argue that a pretty conscious choice by Shakespeare.

CANTOR: It doesn't help today that *Macbeth* will be set in New Jersey, because they want to show a gangster movie. But I think the settings are important. I tentatively make another grouping which would be *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, which I'll very tentatively call the Christian plays, because I think in contrast to the Roman plays, they study tragedy – a new kind of tragedy that Shakespeare sees occurring in a Christian context.

King Lear is a play unto itself, as I see it. I personally think it's Shakespeare's greatest play. It's roughly set in pre-Christian Britain and I think Shakespeare abstracts more than he usually does from history in that play, because it's a play about nature.

And he wants to study nature in a more, dare I say, natural setting there. That's why that play does not have the specificity of locale that many of the other tragedies do.

KRISTOL: And then there are very famous plays set in Italy or in other countries –

CANTOR: Yeah, that would be another grouping. It cuts across the tragedies and comedies. I think *Othello* is usefully studied with *Merchant of Venice*; they are two plays about Venice. It gets a little complicated when we start talking about specific cities like Padua or Verona, whether Shakespeare had any particular conception about them.

He does understand Italy as important and it's surprising in a way how many of his plays are set in Italy because Italy, I think, embodies the tension between religion and politics that's so important to Shakespeare's plays.

KRISTOL: So, if you step back you could say I guess that Shakespeare is trying to give – portray the different human possibilities, the different political regimes, and the different human types in those regimes. You've got ancients. You've got – and there are additional plays that are also randomly set – *Troilus and Cressida* – in different places or confusingly set in more than one place it seems.

But there are ancient plays, there are Christian plays, there are English plays, there –

CANTOR: Yes, it really is remarkable what an effort he made – I'll even call it an archaeological effort – to survey as much as he could of the Europe he lived in but also to go back to antiquity.

Now, that's what the Renaissance was. Shakespeare lived in a period we call the Renaissance. Renaissance means rebirth. And it was the rebirth of classical antiquity. This is the time when people dug up those wonderful statues from the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. It's when the study of Homer was revived. Virgil was studied all over Europe, and Shakespeare was part of that Renaissance movement.

And to me the most remarkable thing he did, among many remarkable things, but maybe the most was bringing ancient Rome back to life on the stage.

I think the continuing focus on Rome – because after all it's right there in our culture – we've got an HBO series on Rome, we've got other – and I think Shakespeare didn't do this uniquely but he helped to revive Rome in a way that has made it a permanent reference point in our culture ever since.

III: Comedy and Tragedy (11:39 – 18:15)

KRISTOL: That's interesting. Let's go back to the Roman plays in a minute, but just to complete the kind of general survey, there are the comedies which we really haven't mentioned, which seem to be set all over the place and sometimes hard to tell where they're set. Maybe I'm wrong about this, but isn't it the case that very few playwrights have written great tragedies and great comedies and Shakespeare seems to have been able to do both easily?

CANTOR: It's arguable that Shakespeare is the only one to have done it on that level. It's interesting that in Plato's *Symposium*, at the end of a very drunken party, Socrates proposes that the greatest playwright would be able to write both comedies and tragedies.

Because we have Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus who wrote tragedies. We have Aristophanes and Menander who wrote comedies. They seem very different to us and in this dialogue, the *Symposium*, Aristophanes, the comedian and Agathon, a tragedian – none of his plays survived, but we know he wrote tragedies.

And Plato portrays them very differently. And in a weird way Shakespeare is the fulfillment of Socrates' prophecy there and I think Shakespeare is a deeply philosophical poet and had chosen the fact that he wasn't bound by the limits of either tragedy or comedy.

To this day, if Woody Allen makes a serious film, we say, what's going on here? Or if Ingmar Bergman tried to make a comedy, we say, what's going on here? Generally speaking, playwrights, filmmakers, they either, we want to say, have a tragic or comic vision.

Now, you know Ben Jonson wrote a couple – he's mainly a comic writer, wrote a couple of tragedies – Roman tragedies, *Catiline* and *Sejanus*; they are actually pretty bad. A guy named Thomas Middleton, who is sort of in the second rank of Shakespeare's contemporaries and may in fact have co-written a couple of plays with Shakespeare, he seemed to move easily between comedy and tragedy.

He wrote some very good tragedies and some very good comedies but they're not on the level of Shakespeare. So, the level that Shakespeare is operating on – there's no one who can combine tragedy and comedy the way he does.

KRISTOL: Just to complete this sort of 30,000-foot look at Shakespeare's works, there are plays that are sort of – people don't know quite what to categorize them as. Isn't that right? Problem Plays, some people call them. . . .

CANTOR: Yeah, there's this guy, Ernest Schanzer came up with this category, "Problem Plays." Most of them I would say are, in fact, comedies. And then there are these last plays, sometimes called the romances, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *A Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, *Henry VIII* in some ways belongs with that group, and then there's this play *Two Noble Kinsmen*. Both *Henry VIII* and *Two Noble Kinsmen* were probably written along with a guy named John Fletcher, but they definitely fit in this sort of late phase of Shakespeare's career.

Let me go back to the comedies though and say one thing in regard to what we were saying about their setting. The comedies are different from the tragedies and by and large they tend to abstract from politics. That's why it is somewhat difficult to fit them into a political scheme.

Shakespeare is interested in romantic love in those plays and in some ways he has to abstract from a political problem to examine the love problem. So, I think – now, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Measure for Measure*, those plays, the setting is highly political and relevant.

But in a lot of Shakespeare's comedies it's as if he is saying, "Let's bracket out the political problem and see what trouble people can get into when they fall in love."

KRISTOL: Which maybe has less to do with the political order.

CANTOR: Although ultimately it does.

KRISTOL: It still does, right. Because even the comedies have a certain surprising amount of politics going on. There are princes and there are dukes and there are issues of who should marry who based on dynastic considerations –

CANTOR: But still *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is nominally set in Athens but it's not like any Athens I've ever read about. Especially since they have nunneries available.

KRISTOL: And Shakespeare also wrote poems, the sonnets?

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: Have you spent much time on those?

CANTOR: Actually I have not. They fit in with what I have to say about the analysis of romantic love in Shakespeare.

There are such textual problem with the sonnets, it's hard to know how to deal with them. And Shakespeare did not publish them; they seem to have been published over his objections. Therefore we can't know the order – the order in which they were written, which would be key to any interpretation, does not have authorial agreement to it. So, I hesitate to get involved with the sonnets, though I have been known to bring them up in talking about romantic love in the comedies.

There are also two narrative poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and some other things too. It is interesting that in those days, to become famous and respected, you had to write poetry. And Shakespeare seems to have wanted – obviously play-writing was his day job. It was like waiting tables in Hollywood, waiting for his big break, and he was trying to write poems that would make him famous and fortunately he discovered, I think, that the plays – writing plays was better than writing poetry, and he became very famous for writing plays. And, I think, fortunately for us he gave up his hope of being a poet instead of being a playwright. It's rather strange, but play-writing then had the status, let's say, of TV writing now. It was not a respectable thing.

KRISTOL: It had been in ancient times, of course, as you say in the *Symposium*. I guess it had fallen out of favor as a serious –

CANTOR: As early as 1598, a guy named Francis Meres went into print, comparing Shakespeare to the ancient playwrights. Mostly the Roman playwrights, Seneca, Plautus and Terrence – and that was in a way his big arrival moment when someone's saying you know this guy Shakespeare is as good as these Roman playwrights. And you know, maybe it went to Shakespeare's head. And he decided "okay, I don't have to do this poetry stuff anymore."

IV: Roman Plays (18:15 – 29:10)

KRISTOL: So Shakespeare you say brings Rome to life for 16th-century, 17th-century Britons and, I guess, for us too. How did he put together the Roman plays, he brings it to life, he also brings to life the change within Rome, right?

CANTOR: I think the most remarkable thing is Shakespeare's interest in Republican Rome. That is, he was living under a monarchy. There was great fascination with the Roman Emperor and empire in his day. After all, you had a Holy Roman Emperor in Europe, and Henry the VIII actually tried to become a Holy Roman Emperor. And several English monarchs were interested in it.

And a lot of the other Roman plays being written in this time dealt with the imperial period, Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*, for example. The most remarkable thing is that Shakespeare goes back to the beginnings of the Republic in *Coriolanus* and wanted to understand Rome at its most different from modern politics.

And he chose a subject that is not all that popular. He's writing about Julius Caesar – other people had done it, Antony and Cleopatra. . . . A few other people have written about Coriolanus, but he's not one of the major figures in world literature.

So, in some ways I see that choice as telling us a lot about Shakespeare. And, again, I happened to be studying this seriously for the first time when I was taking this course with Harvey Mansfield when we were learning the details of the Roman Republic and Shakespeare had got them right. That's what most struck me, that he understood that the Roman Republic had two consuls; he understood the function of the tribunes.

He was reading Plutarch, very carefully, Plutarch's "Life of Coriolanus" and all these details were there. He may have been reading Livy as well, Livy's history of the Roman Republic. He probably was reading Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*. So he had sources for understanding it.

But what I saw was that he understood how this Roman Republic functioned and why it became such a world conqueror. Again, one of the strange facts is the Roman Republic put together what we call the Roman Empire. That vast amount of land was conquered by the armies of the Republic largely, and the Empire was largely a holding action of that.

So Shakespeare shows in *Coriolanus* what it is to live in a deeply political regime; that is, a regime where human life is focused on politics. Part of it is –

KRISTOL: *Coriolanus* is very early?

CANTOR: In Roman history, it's 500 BC.

KRISTOL: So, it's almost the beginning of the Republic?

CANTOR: In a certain sense it is the beginning of the Republic because it's the beginning of the tribunate. That is, Rome had just expelled the Tarquin Kings (these Etruscans had been ruling the city) and they in effect declared a Republic – the name of *king* was hated in Rome for five centuries because they looked upon kings as foreign usurpers, these Tarquins, who rape Roman women – that's the story of the rape of Lucrece and the instigation for expelling the Tarquins.

And, so, Rome was being ruled by a Senate and these two consuls, and *Coriolanus* deals with that very important moment when the people rebel and they are mollified by being given a role in the regime. This – these five tribunes in the play – only two of them are characters in the play. And they're given among other things a right of veto over anything that the Senate rules – so Machiavelli understood this and I think Shakespeare understood it – that the tribunate introduced the popular element into the Roman Republic regime and created what was known in antiquity as a mixed regime.

Not monarchy, not democracy, not aristocracy, but elements of all three. The consuls were the kingly element. The executive element, we would say. The senate was the aristocratic element, and the tribunes represented the people who were the popular or democratic element.

Machiavelli taught us all about this. Actually it goes back to antiquity. Polybius and his history of Rome in the famous Book Six has a description of the Roman regime. And Shakespeare understood how that worked and in particular how it worked to elicit political life among the whole community.

Rome had these two consuls. They were chosen every year. That meant a lot of people in the Roman Republic could aspire to the chief executive position. The consuls led the armies, they convened the

senate, they were essentially what we would call chief executives.

But there were two of them, so you had the beginnings of what we call checks and balances in the regime. The senators basically ruled Rome. They were the wealthy landowners. But because of the role that the plebeians had, the people could feel they had a say in things.

What Shakespeare shows about the Roman Republic is not that it was a democracy in the modern sense and not that there was full and equal participation in politics, but there was widespread participation. So the senators or the patricians, they could legitimately aspire to become consul at some point in their lives.

The plebeians were not going to become consul, but they could become tribunes. Shakespeare is very good at that, showing that the ambitious people among the plebeians have a role in the regime. That's why politics becomes the focus of life in *Coriolanus*.

KRISTOL: So this play that's set at the beginning of this fantastically successful Roman Republic isn't a happy play, though, and *Coriolanus* who was a great man, I think, isn't he supposed to be in a way? A great man is exiled or leaves and then dies, fighting against Rome, as I recall. So what's that about, the tension between the great individual –

CANTOR: Yes, certainly the play is tragic because it deals with the great tension between the most prominent figure in the community and the community itself. But, here's the deal, Coriolanus threatens the Roman Republic precisely because of his overwhelming superiority. This is a man who seems to win battles single-handedly.

And the threat in the play actually to the Republic is that everyone is fawning all over him, the patricians and the plebeians, and we see there a formula that was eventually going to produce Julius Caesar. What eventually was going to destroy the Republic is the moment when one of the patricians becomes so prominent that he rules the city single-handedly.

So, actually the *Coriolanus* episode teaches the Romans, I believe, a lot of valuable lessons. It teaches the patricians that, no, they shouldn't be too haughty, too proud in the face of the plebeians. It teaches them they shouldn't let one of their number become too prominent.

The plebeians learn that they have the power to expel a great patrician but it backfires. Because in that play he comes back leading their enemies, the Volscians, and nearly destroys Rome. And so it's actually a tragic story, which has a sobering effect, I would say, on the city. It's a lesson in moderation.

The patricians learn that they have to be more accommodating to the plebeians. The plebeians have to learn not to press their power too much, and actually what emerges from that play is the balance in this mixed regime that sustained itself for five centuries.

KRISTOL: And Shakespeare skips those five centuries because maybe it's less exciting to write plays about, you know, stable, successful regimes –

CANTOR: Well, he could have written some great plays. . . .

KRISTOL: He could have, but he skips – just to get back to *Coriolanus* – the most evident thing about it is also just this amazing expulsion of him, the greatest Roman of the time. And so the tension between, I guess, individual greatness in any regime – is that part of the point? – in that respect it's not Roman-specific?

CANTOR: It's really – the central theme of Shakespeare tragedy is the tension between a single great individual and the community he both serves and defies. And you see that in *Macbeth*, you see it in *Othello*. In a weird way you see it in *Hamlet*. You can see it in *King Lear* and certainly all the Roman plays.

That's one of the most fundamental tragic facts for Shakespeare that political excellence and human excellence are not the same thing. And that a great man can be very dangerous for the community he seems to serve, but may in fact want to go beyond and even take over in some cases.

KRISTOL: Just to get ahead of the Roman plays for a minute, it is striking how impressive these pretty awful tyrants are in Shakespeare. You know you can't like or admire a Macbeth, presumably. On the other hand, he's a great man in a way, right?

CANTOR: Shakespeare is very interested in the phenomenon of tyranny. The plebeians accuse Coriolanus of being a tyrant. Certainly, it's a major charge against Julius Caesar, and I show in my book *Shakespeare's Rome* that Antony behaves like a tyrant.

Shakespeare takes us back to the original Greek meaning of the word, *tyrannos*, which basically meant a self-made man. A Greek *tyrannos* at the start of the use of the term was not necessarily a bad guy. It was some guy who came to the throne by his own power, and the sixth century BC is known as the age of tyrants, and the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus was a pretty great guy. He may have created Athenian tragedy. He may be the first guy to have Homer's poems set down in writing.

And only gradually did the Greeks learn that if you came to the throne on your own efforts you might be a nasty ruler, because you were very worried about someone doing the same thing to you. And that's the logic that Shakespeare shows with tyranny in *Richard III*, *Macbeth* as well.

So, in some ways he was very fascinated by this phenomenon because he had his doubts about people who had simply inherited the throne. They often are not good rulers then and I think he was in tune with the Machiavellian theme about the tensions between legitimate princes and illegitimate princes and how illegitimate princes have more energy, and that's certainly what you see in someone like Richard III.

So, yes, they are not in moral terms admirable but their sheer energy can be pretty impressive.

V: Rulers and Regimes (29:10 – 41:04)

KRISTOL: And so is Caesar, speaking of energy. So we have *Coriolanus*. And then we fast-forward, so to speak, to this amazing moment, which was, of course, an extremely famous moment in world history, before Shakespeare and *Julius Caesar*, I suppose, of Caesar and his assassination.

CANTOR: As far as we know Shakespeare wrote *Julius Caesar* first, and maybe seven, eight, nine years later he wrote *Coriolanus*. But it's seamless how he integrates the two plays and you can see their relation in the opening scenes.

In the opening scene in *Coriolanus*, the people are hungry, they're complaining about the grain that the patricians are hoarding, and they're in rebellion. They're accusing Coriolanus of being an enemy of the people. Fast-forward to *Julius Caesar*, and the plebeians in the opening scene are out on holiday. They're wearing their best clothing, which is a big development because they have best clothing now. In Coriolanus' day they just had rags.

And they're celebrating Caesar's triumph over Pompey and their tribunes are berating them for doing that. In *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare shows the plebeians were still deeply suspicious of the patricians and that checked patrician power in the city.

But what we see in *Julius Caesar* is the guy that played Roman politics perfectly, Julius Caesar, and what he has learned to do is get the people on his side. And once he does that he unbalances this mixed Roman regime and is on the verge of becoming sole ruler of Rome, even maybe king. Though it's clear people still don't like the name of king and so he's trying to arrange a deal with the senate – he'll be called king outside Italy, everywhere else in the empire, but he won't take the title in Rome.

The whole scene of Mark Antony offering the crown is part of that public relations stunt to keep the people convinced that he's not going to become king: "We won't impose a king on you." And, yet, we see from Casca's account that Julius Caesar is coveting that crown.

So, basically – again, it's something that Roman historians know and again Shakespeare would have learned from Machiavelli – the great problem for the Roman Republic was growth and size. Once it reached this pan-Mediterranean empire, they had to extend the terms of the consuls. It took you a year just to get your army to Spain.

And as Machiavelli argues and other people have argued about Rome, once the consuls have served for more than one year, their armies would start to become loyal to them and not to Rome.

And that's what we see at the opening of *Julius Caesar*. The armies loyal to Pompey had been defeated by the armies loyal to Caesar, and no one's loyal to Rome any more. They're loyal to their leader, and so that's what the Empire is: personal politics. And Shakespeare shows how that transforms everything now.

KRISTOL: And Brutus, is he loyal to the old Republic?

CANTOR: Yes. You see these figures like Brutus and Cassius and all the conspirators who are trying to restore the Republic and who bitterly complained about the preeminence of one man. I mean Cassius has this great speech where he says, "When did we ever see this before in Rome that one man is ruling the whole city?" and "This guy Caesar, he's not better than I am, I once had to rescue him from drowning – and he once had a fever in Spain, he's just a human being."

And you do see the old Republic spirit alive, but it's about to be defeated. To me, the turning point – and I think Shakespeare has indicated this – is when Brutus gets up and gives this fairly good speech defending the murder of Caesar and the effort to restore the Republic – some guy in the crowd says, "Let him be Caesar," and that's when it's over, when you realize that this whole thing that was done to restore the Republic at most can produce a change of regime and the very name Caesar has become a title now. We don't need kings, we need Caesars.

KRISTOL: And I suppose *Antony and Cleopatra*, I mean it's set right afterwards, so those two are kind of a pair?

CANTOR: It's interesting that, really, in terms of composition, *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are the pair. That is, they were written at the same time. I believe that, having written *Julius Caesar*, at some point, perhaps even when he wrote *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare conceived of having two pendant plays, one which would go back and show the foundation of the Republic – that's *Coriolanus* – and one would show effectively the foundation of the empire, namely *Antony and Cleopatra*, growing out of what happens to Julius Caesar. And they're roughly quite continuous.

KRISTOL: And *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is taken to be – I don't know what it's taken to be exactly by most viewers and critics – a bizarre love story, I guess. I mean what's the political implications of that and looking forward and –

CANTOR: Well, the bizarre love story follows from the transformed regime. That is one thing – again, this is one of the things that Shakespeare is so good at. He shows how un-erotic the Rome of *Coriolanus* is. Coriolanus is a married man. He greets his wife as "my gracious silence, hail!", and he talks about how since he left Rome, my lips "hath virgin'd it e'er since." No sex for Coriolanus. *Coriolanus* is quite striking among Shakespeare's plays for the absence of sex. There are no dirty jokes in it.

Shakespeare shows that as a consequence of the focus on politics under the Roman Republic the whole erotic side of life is suppressed. In *Julius Caesar*, you start to see that change, and the relation between Julius Caesar and Calphurnia and between Brutus and Portia is a much deeper, richer relationship than

any romantic relationship shown in *Coriolanus*.

Under the empire, *eros* is released. The whole thrust of the empire is to suppress politics. Getting people interested in politics will only get them to challenge the emperor and so it's in effect imperial policy to encourage love affairs.

We talk about bread and circuses as the policy of the Roman emperors, and that's something Shakespeare shows. Caesar – Julius Caesar has that speech early in *Julius Caesar* where he says, "Antonius, let me have men about me that are fat." And he talks about, "Cassius has a lean and hungry look, such men are dangerous."

Caesar – Julius Caesar doesn't like political men, ambitious political men. He wants people like Antony who go to parties, who stay up late, who like music, who will be interested in anything but politics and so the whole love affair in *Antony and Cleopatra* occurs in the context of a de-politicizing world. The emperors precisely want people to divert their energy into love so that they won't challenge the rule of the emperor.

KRISTOL: And *Antony and Cleopatra* ends with the victory obviously of Augustus and the beginning of the Roman Empire and I suppose these were all pre-Christian – but isn't there – it seems to me you argue this in your book – there's a sort of looking forward you might say to Christianity in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

CANTOR: Yes, and I develop that very esoterically in my book, *Shakespeare's Rome*. I'm hoping to write a new book that will make these arguments more explicit.

There are a number of references in *Antony and Cleopatra* to Herod, for example. There are five references to Herod that can't help but make you think of what was happening contemporaneous with these events.

There are some varied quotations from the New Testament. Antony refers to the bulls of Bashan at one point. Look that up, it's Psalm 22, the one that begins, "My god, my god, why hast thou forsaken me?," which is a line famously associated with Jesus.

And I do think Shakespeare is correlating the rise of the Roman Empire with what would become the rise of Christianity. After all, under Constantine, the Roman Empire became Christian, but I'm particularly interested in the way the Roman plays show the emergence of a Christian ethic.

I actually use Nietzsche a lot, Friedrich Nietzsche, in developing this, and I do think that Shakespeare anticipated Nietzsche in some ways through keys that come out of Machiavelli.

But one of the great transformations in the course of the Roman plays is: losing becomes winning. In *Coriolanus*, winning is winning. It's very much what Nietzsche would call a master-morality culture. It's one where strength is virtue. It is held that "valor is the chiefest virtue," one of the Roman patricians says, and you prove yourself in that play by winning.

It's very interesting--the transformation that starts to occur in *Julius Caesar* in a new world where personal loyalty has replaced the old loyalty of the Republic. And Brutus dies saying, "I'm going to have more glory losing today than Mark Antony and Octavius are going to have from winning."

Why? Because his followers will be more deeply attached to him in loss. And he starts to suggest – he calls what happens to Mark Antony and Octavius, the man who became Augustus, "vile conquest." What we start to see is what Nietzsche referred to as the "revaluation of values" in the ancient world, that suddenly losing becomes winning, defeat becomes victory. Even death becomes life, and that's all over in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

That's a play in which your aim is to lose a battle. The beginning of Act III, a Roman captain, Ventidius, comes out and is being urged to pursue the Parthians and carry the frontier of Rome further. He says, "No. I could do that, but then I'd frighten Antony. He'd think I was trying to replace him."

And so he says, "I'm going to make choice of loss." That's an amazing moment in the Roman plays. These are plays that have been geared towards the Roman notion – choice of *victory* – and suddenly you see in the transformed conditions of the empire – now when there can be only one ruler – if you look ambitious, if you win a great victory, that ruler, that emperor is going to be suspicious, and Ventidius points out, "A friend of mine just got fired because he won a victory that made Antony look bad."

So, this is a real – this is a very interesting aspect of the Roman play that, in effect, they show the development of what Nietzsche understood as this reevaluation of ethics. And so by the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, you have Cleopatra talking of heaven. It's very interesting, for example, that she says, "Then, is it a sin to seek death?" For the first time in the Roman plays, suicide is presented as a sin. We are very far on the way –

KRISTOL: And she uses the word *sin*?

CANTOR: She uses the word *sin*.

KRISTOL: Which is not – which is anachronistic, I guess, you might say?

CANTOR: The play has a lot of interesting anachronisms that I think are quite deliberate and that are pointing towards the whole transformation of antiquity – really, the end of classical antiquity as we know it and the beginnings of the Christian world.

VI: Christian Plays (41:05 – 50:16)

KRISTOL: And then Shakespeare writes all these Christian plays, if you want to call them that. The plays in which, let's say, the monarchies are – the political order very much is in a Christian context, in some cases, claims the authority of Christianity, and in other cases, just seems to be in Christian times. And Shakespeare seems – always seemed to me, at least – to be very interested in the effect of Christianity on politics –

CANTOR: Yes, and this is the thing that, for example, makes him different from Plato and Aristotle. I think one way or another he was familiar with Plato and Aristotle, and in many ways I think his attitudes are what we would describe as ancient. I think he really admired republican government, for example, or the idea of the mixed regime. And so he's very interesting to explore on that.

But the thing he has to deal with that Plato and Aristotle did not is Christianity and he – I think he's fascinated by the way Christianity transformed the terms of human life, and Nietzsche is famous for being anti-Christian. He even wrote a book called *The Antichrist*.

But Nietzsche says Christianity made man an interesting being. And I think Shakespeare would have understood that claim, and, indeed, I view Shakespeare as a figure of the Renaissance. The Renaissance was a rebirth of classical antiquity, but within a Christian civilization. And that means some of Shakespeare's most fascinating figures – and I have in mind particularly Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth – are people who are caught between the tension between the classical and the Christian traditions.

Now, when it comes to tragedy, I'm very much guided by Hegel's theory of tragedy. Most people know Aristotle. I think it's unfortunate that a lot of people don't know that Hegel had a very important theory of tragedy. Hegel's theory of tragedy looked at the tragic situation. And for Hegel a tragic situation is the one where there is a conflict of two goods.

If you just have a conflict of good and evil, that's just melodrama and it's easy to resolve. But his

prototypical tragedy was Sophocles' *Antigone*, where Antigone stands up for the good of the family and Creon stands up for the good of the city. And though they're not equally justified, at least both Creon and Antigone can make a public defense of what they're doing.

And I think Shakespeare – though he had not read Hegel – was operating with this notion of tragedy – by the way, Hegel to some extent developed it from his own reading of Shakespeare – so Shakespeare finds the Renaissance a particularly tragic era.

Because by reviving classical antiquity within a Christian civilization you basically were setting up two ethics for people to follow. *Hamlet's* a case in point. Here, Hamlet is faced with this issue of revenge.

Now, the classical tradition and the Christian tradition dictate very different responses to a revenge situation, and I feel that's the key to understanding Hamlet's inaction. His inability to make a decision. He's being torn in two directions. So, I think Shakespeare in the play is, like Hamlet, exploring the deep ethical contradictions at a time when people were trying to revive the ancient world in a modern context.

As I like to put it, the Christian principle is the meek shall inherit the earth. The classical position is the Greek shall inherit the earth. Those are two very different views of the world.

KRISTOL: So *Hamlet* is not just about an indecisive guy who couldn't make up his mind, had issues with his mother, and all that? It's funny when you read a lot of the literary critics, it's so psychological, but Shakespeare puts it in a particular time and place. And as you say, the characters discuss, don't they, to some degree or allude to at least ancient and classical and Christian –

CANTOR: Hamlet's always thinking of "Oh, I'm off to kill my mother but wait a minute, Nero did that and that was horrible. I can't do that." As I like to put it, Hamlet has some genuine things to think about, and Shakespeare presents the situation, which really gets to the heart of the ethical contradictions of the Renaissance, this issue of revenge.

And, so the play turns on the moment when Hamlet has the opportunity to kill Claudius and doesn't and gives a long speech about why he doesn't do it, and the reason he gives is, "If I kill him now, he's at prayer, he may go to heaven. I've got to kill him at a moment when he goes to hell."

Now, virtually every critic I know simply dismisses that speech as an excuse. The whole Freudian theory of *Hamlet* begins from the idea that Hamlet *can't* mean this. He's got to have some other motive.

I begin with what Hamlet says. And you realize then that one of the things the play is showing is that the task of revenge has become incredibly more complicated in the Christian world. When Achilles goes to kill Hector, all he has to do is kill him. He doesn't sit there and worry, "Is he going to the Elysian Fields or is he going to Hades?"

But Hamlet does and then he's in a bind, because he's dealing with something invisible. Claudius's soul, not his body. All Achilles has to do is kill that body, and his task is done. His revenge is done.

Shakespeare shows how much more incredibly complicated the task of revenge is when you're acting upon someone's soul. You have to wonder where the soul is going, how will you ever know? People have said, "Well, look Claudius gets up and says, 'My soul's not going to heaven, I know I'm a hypocrite.' And therefore Hamlet's not really caring about that."

But Hamlet doesn't hear that. And Hamlet doesn't know where Claudius' soul is going. Hamlet lives in an incredibly more complicated universe, because he lives in the world of the Christian afterlife.

The whole "to be or not to be" speech is about that. It's that we *don't* know where we're going. "The undiscovered country from which no traveler returns." That's what puzzles the will. It's not that Hamlet just thinks generically, he thinks about this fundamental Christian issue. Is suicide prohibited, is there life

after death, who knows? They're genuine questions. Hamlet would be pitiful if he was just an irresolute, confused person.

In fact, I think he's the great figure he is because he thinks through to the fundamental contradictions and tensions in Renaissance life. That's why he's the ultimate Renaissance Man, because he thinks about both sides of the Renaissance dilemma.

KRISTOL: And *Hamlet* is set, I guess, in the – it's hard to tell – fairly recently from Shakespeare's point of view?

CANTOR: Yes, yes. Again it's a little confusing. It comes out of a Norse saga that would be set earlier. But the references to France and tennis in it, for example, and fencing – make it – it has a real Renaissance feel.

After all, there's a reference to the University of Wittenberg in it. I mean you can date things mentioned in the play to the 16th century, and I think –

KRISTOL: So Shakespeare wants – I think that shows his art that he, people say this is his source so his own play is somehow set when the source is, but it seems like several times he takes the source but then he moves the time and place sometimes, precisely to make a point like this.

CANTOR: Yeah, in fact my metaphor for Hamlet is a Renaissance Man thrust into an Icelandic saga. And that's his problem. If he were a nice Norse warrior, he could handle this easily, and in the source story he just burns everybody in the end, in the castle.

But in this play there's a kind of anachronism in the play that takes a modern man – for Shakespeare a modern man is a Renaissance Man – and puts him in a more primitive situation. And actually Shakespeare creates a sense – there's an enormous time gap within the play where Hamlet's father seems to live in the world of Icelandic saga.

He lives in a world of hand-to-hand combat with the elder Fortinbras, and he's associated with the classical world. There's all this effort to create a sense of a Homeric world. Reuben Brower has shown that the diction of the play echoes the diction of the Elizabethan translations of Homer, for example. "The sledged Polacks on the ice" for example. That's a Homeric epithet, "sledged Polack." It creates the sense of Hamlet caught between this Homeric world in the past and this modern sophisticated world he has to live in in the present.

VII: The Theological-Political Problem VII: (50:17 – 1:03:11)

KRISTOL: And some of the other tragedies, you say, similarly sort of focus on the religious, the theological-political question?

CANTOR: Yeah, I see *Othello* and *Macbeth* as the inverse of this. They are about Homeric heroes who are thrust into a modern Christian world and have the opposite of Hamlet's problem, though in some ways, it's the same problem, being caught between two ethics.

In the case of *Macbeth*, at the start of the play he's this noble warrior. He's being praised for cutting people in half. Everybody is just going bonkers and giving him awards because he hacks people in half.

And then he kills Duncan, and suddenly everybody's all bent out of shape with him. And it is a sense that he would like to live in a simple Homeric world. He says this when Banquo's ghost comes back. He says, "Face me in any other form. A Hyrcan tiger, I can handle that. What I can't handle is ghosts." And indeed, what we see in that play is the Homeric hero thrown off balance when he's in a Christian world.

Macbeth says to those murderers he hires to kill Banquo, "Are you so 'gospelled?" It's really quite an

amazing word. We look this up, and it's the first use of the word *gospelled* in the English language. He's convinced them that Banquo has been making life difficult for them. And he basically then says, "Are you so Christian that you won't kill this guy now?" It's an amazing moment. And then when Banquo's ghost comes back, Macbeth says— excuse me if I can't quote Shakespeare literally here – but he says, "There was a time when you killed people they stayed dead. But now they come back."

And in a way that's what's so disconcerting to Macbeth, to put it mildly, that he can live in a world, the old heroic world, where you face your opponent on the battlefield then "damned be him who first cries, 'Hold enough!,'" as Macduff says.

But now he's living in a world where you kill people and they don't stay dead. And he is haunted by that. He's actually a man with a deep Christian conscience. I think the whole play is set in a moment when you see a Scotland that has been Christianized and it's not yet comfortable with it. Whereas England is presented as being under the rule of Edward the Confessor, being highly Christian.

Now, *Othello* is similar in this sense that you're in the city of Venice, which is a commercial city, a Christian city, it's got a problem that its opponents are these Ottoman Turks who are great military figures and threatening Venice. And their solution is to hire their own Turks; they're Christian merchants, they can't fight these Ottoman Turks so they'll hire Othello and he'll win battles for them because he's a barbarian.

They don't care that he thinks he's a Christian. He, in fact, is a Christian and thinks of himself that way. And, in fact, then the problem develops when he wants to marry a Venetian woman. He thinks of himself as a Venetian.

The city really doesn't think of him that way. He is their hired Turk, their hired killer. And so he's caught again between two worlds where in many ways he would like to be a Homeric hero. He actually offers the most Homeric simile in all of Shakespeare, that famous "Like to the Pontic sea" simile he speaks – and he then is himself unnerved when he enters this Christian city and Iago convinces him he is an outsider. That he doesn't understand Venetians, especially he doesn't understand Venetian women.

And why? He can't see into their souls. It's actually the same problem that Hamlet faces dealing with Claudius. But Iago's genius in the play is to convince Othello, "You know, you're a kind of country bumpkin, and you're in the big city now. You're in Venice. And women do very suspicious things here, and you just don't understand."

That's what unnerves him. It's amazing in a way how easily Othello succumbs to this deception on Iago's part, but part of it is, he too is a man of battlefields. He was used to the open confrontation of soldiers on the battlefield and now he's in this almost bedroom comedy, bedroom farce, where women are cuckolding their husbands. And he is deeply disconcerted by that.

And again – Iago says something like "her honor is something unseen," and that's when he grabs Othello, when he realizes he doesn't understand the depth of soul. Something Shakespeare shows– men like Macbeth, Coriolanus, Othello, they're warriors and a certain superficiality goes along with that.

And then they are deeply subject to the machinations of witches in the case of Macbeth; Iago in the case of Othello, and I guess you can say Aufidius in the case of Coriolanus.

KRISTOL: And I guess *Othello* – Venice does seem to be the place where there's an attempt to be very cosmopolitan, and I think Bloom argues that in *The Merchant of Venice*. There are Jews, there are Christians. They are living in the same city and getting along okay, I guess. But then the limits of sort of cosmopolitanism, perhaps, Shakespeare seems to have thought about.

CANTOR: It is interesting that Shakespeare wrote two plays about Venice. He understood it was the most modern community in Europe, that it seemed to be pointing to the future. And above all that Venice

seemed to be doing what other cities or other communities were not doing, namely, incorporating Christians, Jews, and really, in effect, Muslims, if you look at the way Venice views Othello, even though he's a Christian in his own eyes.

And Shakespeare shows that the basis the city does this on is commerce. It really is the Lockean principle, the principle of toleration. Shylock the Jew who says to the Christians in Venice, "I won't eat with you, pray with you, but I will buy and trade with you." And that's the Venetian hope, that you could establish a community on the basis of commerce.

In one play, *Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare treats it comically and things in Venice seem to work out, though only by having Shylock forced to convert to Christianity at the end.

In *Othello*, it works out tragically. So, I think Shakespeare would have said the verdict's out on Venice. I'll even say the verdict's out on liberal modernity, whether this is going to work.

Because you can see the logic that's working out in Venice. These Venetians are merchants. There are certain things they have trouble doing as Christian merchants. As Christian merchants they are not warlike enough so they hire Othello.

They can't take interest but need a money market, so they bring Shylock and other Jews into the city and get these functions performed by people who are not of the same ethnicity. But that then leads to other tensions.

And I have to say, I think, one question Shakespeare raises is the efficacy of Venice – will it work? But I think he's raising the question, maybe it would be a problem if it did work? Because what he does show is that old ideas, nobility, religious ideas – they have to be gutted in order to make this commercial republic function.

And, so you start to see – Shakespeare is a genius so he has this reflected comically in *The Merchant of Venice* when Shylock's daughter Jessica, runs off with Lorenzo and is converting to Christianity, Launcelot Gobbo, the servant of Shylock who's transferred to them, says, "All these Christians – all these Jews converting to Christians. It's going to raise the price of pork in Venice."

And he's upset by that, and you know Shakespeare shows that you may get this agreement but only by lowering your sights. It's going to take away a lot of the power of religion. One thing Shakespeare shows about Venice is that the power of religion is waning.

I noticed this scene at the opening of the play when they're worried, "Why is this character Antonio so sad?" And one guy says, "Yeah, he's a merchant, he's worried about his ships. Maybe they're sinking somewhere." He says, "This always happens to me. I'm in church and all I'm thinking about is my ship sinking," and that is an incredible clue Shakespeare gives us about Venice at the beginning of the play-- where this is a community where even in church they're thinking of commerce. And I think Shakespeare sees that as a possible lowering of the tone. I think he really – it's amazing how well he understood the coming of modernity, even when he was writing. That Venice was it.

KRISTOL: That's what strikes me about this – that was early. I mean this was the 1600s, and that's before Hobbes, before Locke, contemporaneous with Bacon – who some people think Bacon wrote Shakespeare, right?

CANTOR: There's Machiavelli already. But the economic argument is – that's extraordinarily early – that he should show the connection between Christian conversion and the price of pork. That's just an astounding moment. It also shows that he understood the law of supply and demand.

KRISTOL: Right. And knew something about Jewish dietary laws though there were no Jews in England then, I guess?

CANTOR: Well, you know, James Shapiro has written a very good book called *Shakespeare and the Jews*, which shows that it's been estimated there may have been as many as 10,000 Jews. Because they were nominally illegal, but you had trade going on, and London was a major trading center, traded with the East – Elizabeth had a commercial treaty with the Ottoman Sultan. And, so there were probably a lot of Jews living in England, either nominally converted or concealing their Judaism.

A Portuguese, converted Jewish physician, Rodrigo Lopez, was accused of trying to poison Queen Elizabeth. I believe he was executed. Many people have seen that as connected with Marlowe's play, *The Jew of Malta*, and Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.

So, there were certainly people suspected of being Jewish at the time, and I'm convinced that Shakespeare traveling the circles he did, namely, theater, would have met a lot of Jews. If there were Jews in London they were going to the theater. Come on, let's face it.

KRISTOL: Good point. And he was interested in the question of, I am sure, the relation of Judaism to Christianity. I guess he doesn't really address that in great detail. But obviously he was well aware of the tensions –

CANTOR: Yeah, and in some ways the play turns on a Jewish literalism and a more symbolic, interpretive impulse of Christianity. And he understood the function of the law in Judaism, the function of family. He really did – you know that moment when Shylock says, "Are these your Christian husbands?" – saying, "You know, no Jewish wives and husbands would argue this way."

And that's really quite remarkable. And, of course, it's been shown by the – so many Jewish actors have embraced that role. I saw Morris Carnovsky play Shylock, and I've seen David Suchet play Shylock, and you know it's interesting that many – it is a very popular play in the Yiddish theater. It was actually translated to Yiddish around 1900.

And, so yeah, it's really – Jews have felt that Shakespeare understood them, and I think quite rightly. He understood everybody.

KRISTOL: Impressive.

Part II

I: The English History Plays (00:15 – 24:11)

KRISTOL: Let's talk about the English plays that Shakespeare wrote. I think it's three Roman plays – maybe one or two more, depending on what you count – but what, ten, I think, English plays –

CANTOR: Ten.

KRISTOL: Not counting, I guess, a couple that are set – *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, which are kind of English. But *King John* through, what, *Henry VIII*, which are really consecutive almost – well, there's some skipping within. So, what's the overall theme, point – what is he teaching us?

CANTOR: The heart of these plays is what we call the second tetralogy. That's *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Parts One and Two*, and *Henry V*.

There's the first tetralogy, the three *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III*. What's odd is Shakespeare wrote about the later historical events early. And then there's these two separate plays, *King John* and *Henry VIII*.

I think Shakespeare was very interested in the issue of kingship. I mean he was living under a monarchy and chose to – insofar as he was interested in politics – he chose to examine monarchy. He's writing for

an English audience. I think he understood these plays would be very popular.

By the way, he, more or less, created the genre. You know, a lot of people wrote history plays after – Marlowe had written some before him – but it's Shakespeare who made the most sustained effort in the area. Ten out of his 37 plays. So it was very important to him.

Now, traditionally in literary criticism, people assume Shakespeare was an uncritical supporter of the English monarchy. I think he really was thinking about the monarchy and how it might be reformed. For example, I think he understood the greatest defect of monarchy was succession. That no matter how good a king might be, there was no guarantee that his son or daughter would be equal. That's something Shakespeare shows in effect when Henry VI succeeds Henry V – Henry V, probably the greatest king Shakespeare ever portrayed. But his son, partly because he came to the throne as a child, doesn't work out as a king.

Moreover, I think Shakespeare was interested in the way being brought up to the throne is a corrupting influence, and something he shows about Richard II, and much of the *Henry IV* plays, I think, are designed to show how a king might get a good education.

So, I don't think Shakespeare was an uncritical supporter of monarchy as a form of government in the abstract. So, for example, he shows an unusual interest in republics for someone who's supposed to be just supporting monarchy. And we talked about the Roman Republic – Venice as a republic is another example.

So, I think what's going on in the plays is that Shakespeare is accepting the fact that England is a monarchy. He's not going to try to bring about a revolution and institute a republic. But I think he was interested in how could we reform the monarchy and maybe move it more in the direction of a republic? And that I think is the key to the story of *Henry IV* and *Henry V*.

And here it shows the interrelation of Shakespeare's work, that what is learned about Rome is relevant to what he shows about Britain. Again Rome was famous for a mixed regime, that combined elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. And I think Shakespeare thought something like that would be plausible for England.

And here, again, I go back to the fact that I originally developed my interest in Shakespeare and politics in Harvey Mansfield's Course Gov 112C, and there this was exactly the continuity we studied, that – we studied ancient Rome as a mixed regime. And then we looked at the 18th-century British monarchy as a mixed regime, because, after all, Britain had a monarch, a House of Lords, and a House of Commons. And famously it combined monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic elements.

And I don't want to give Shakespeare credit for this, but I also wouldn't exclude his influence. Because what he shows in the *Henry V* plays – *Henry V* and then the *Henry IV* plays – is that this is what a good monarch would do: he would learn to accommodate the nobles in his regime and give a popular touch to his kingdom.

So, the point about Henry V – the man we know as Prince Hal in the *Henry IV* plays – is in his youth he goes among his people. He says, "I've learned to drink with every tinker in his own language." He knows the slang of the common people. That's going to come in good stead to him when he becomes monarch and knows how to talk to people in their own language.

And what we see in *Henry V* is a monarch who very cleverly has chosen to make a claim to the French throne and lead a war against France. That accommodates his nobles. It gives him – gives them something to look forward to, to win glory, and to win lands. And he makes a big deal the night before the battle of Agincourt, "Just stand behind me now, and everyone of you will 'gentle your condition.' I'm going to ennoble you."

And then, in terms of the people, he gives them a national cause to get behind. He has a couple of conversations where the people say, “We got to stop arguing with each; we’ve got the French to worry about.” And he really does have a common touch – “a little touch of Harry in the night” as Shakespeare puts it.

And in a curious way that play, which has been always popular in England – the great patriotic story of Henry V – I think that held up a model that the English monarchs understood. That the monarchy had – could not be aloof. Shakespeare presents the French in that play as medieval aristocrats writing sonnets to their horses, living in a world of chivalry, completely out of touch with their people, utter contempt for the British and their common soldiers. Henry V puts together a citizen-soldier army, and that’s why he triumphs.

And again I’m not saying Shakespeare created modern Britain, but I wouldn’t underestimate the influence of those plays. People have called these plays the *Henriad* as if they were the *Iliad*, as if these were the epic of the English people. And you do see famous Englishmen, famous politicians, referring to these plays.

I think Shakespeare thought you could make the monarchy stronger by making it more accommodating to the nobles and also to the people, without – this is the interesting thing about Shakespeare though, when we’re talking about Shakespeare and politics – he does not seem to be particularly interested in the institutional aspects of politics. It has upset some of my colleagues, for example, in Shakespeare and the politics field – he’s not interested in Parliament. He barely ever mentions Parliament. He doesn’t see Parliament as the solution; it’s a king in touch with the people.

Shakespeare’s politics is very personal. For him, the fundamental question is, “Who rules?” And given a monarchy, his full attention is turned to the question of how do you get a good monarch? Not as Hobbes and Locke were to do – not how do you create an institutional framework.

So, again, I don’t want to exaggerate his importance – as if Shakespeare created the English regime. But it is interesting that as European monarchs go, the English monarchs have been more accommodating to the common people, and that’s why they’re still sitting on the throne when the Hohenzollerns and the Hapsburgs are out waiting tables in Vienna and Berlin.

KRISTOL: The successful ones in the 17th – I mean, England, went in the, what you’re suggesting is in a way, a Shakespearean direction. With the revolution in 1688, it wasn’t exactly – and the killing of King Charles I – it wasn’t exactly a smooth thing.

But let’s go backwards before – he also had thoughts going forward, but it seems to me if you just take the core history plays, I guess – I don’t know if that’s a phrase I invented or if it’s used anywhere. I mean they go consecutively, really, *Richard II*, *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI*, *Richard III* – and that seems to be Shakespeare’s account, isn’t it? I mean just superficially – if you look at *Richard II*, it seems to me of, you know, a very Christian monarch and monarchy, ending up – well *Richard III*, to say the least, isn’t Christian, he’s this incredible, brutal – brilliant – but a brutal tyrant and then he ends up yielding. And then we do have *Henry VIII* so that’s kind of a happy ending you might say to these history plays. But I do think – don’t you think he’s showing the progression from Richard II through the Henries, the development of modern politics in some ways –

CANTOR: Yes, and I have an essay –

KRISTOL: And not just the monarchy, I mean –

CANTOR: Yeah – no, I have an essay on *Henry V* that’s called “From Medieval to Modern Politics,” that what Shakespeare shows is the movement from feudal monarchy – and that’s *f-e-u-d-a-l* – though it’s also futile as Shakespeare portrays it – from feudal monarchy to something more modern, centralized monarchy.

And when you go back to *King John* already and then start looking at *Richard II*, the defect of a medieval monarchy is it's a divided sovereignty, that, for one thing, the feudal system means that you've got these barons and other lords who have their own armies, and the king is first among equals and often gets in trouble when the barons decide to take a walk and pursue their own interest.

The other great division is church-state. That is the – again, this is something that Shakespeare faces that Plato and Aristotle didn't. He's showing what happens to politics when you have a trans-political religion such as Christianity, which makes very powerful but different claims on people's allegiance.

And essentially the narrative of the history plays as a whole is the independence of the Vatican. King John first proposes it. Henry VIII makes it work, and Henry V –

KRISTOL: Independence from the Vatican, from the church?

CANTOR: Yeah, that – what Shakespeare shows is that politics leads to civil war when the barons are independent and, at least, a civil war when the church claims an independent authority. And the whole working out of the history plays is the barons are killed off in the course of the civil wars and the church is brought under national sovereignty.

It's very interesting that *Henry V* begins with a scene among two archbishops – maybe a bishop and an archbishop and they're talking about a bill the king has brought before Parliament. It's the first time – one of the few times Parliament is mentioned in Shakespeare – and the bill is to appropriate the church lands and use them to fund a new aristocracy that will be directly loyal to the king.

That was Henry VIII's strategy. That was the Tudor strategy centuries later. And Shakespeare sees that Henry V was already contemplating it. The church, to avert that outcome, makes the deal that they'll contribute a lot of money to Henry's war against France and will legitimate it. They'll offer a church argument, a religious argument in favor of his claim to the French throne. So, that shows how much Shakespeare sees as the problem having a national church.

Now, you know, this not so unusual. I mean this is what Tudor doctrine was. Shakespeare understands it in very Machiavellian terms, how much scheming is involved in it. But I believe he supported that Tudor policy, which is to have a Church of England, where the head of state is also the head of the church, so that you have a unified nation, where people aren't torn in two different directions.

Richard II begins in the full medieval world. There's a big tournament going on – a great moment of chivalry. And it all turns out to be phony. There's all sorts of wheeling and dealing behind it. Basically, we see the end of the medieval world there, and the entering of the modern world where things are settled by very political means.

I think Shakespeare – you know, he wouldn't have had the term *medieval*, he wouldn't have had the term *modern*, but I think what we look at as the medieval the world he saw as a failure, politically. That the intrusion of religious concerns into politics was leading to Crusades, for example, which his monarchs are still proposing, it was diverting people away from what they needed to do at home.

So, you can see the secularizing of politics in Shakespeare. That's the way in which you can talk about it more broadly – the modernity of modern politics is emerging in Shakespeare's plays.

KRISTOL: And I suppose whatever his judgment on it – I assume he might have been well-disposed to some of that, some aspects of modernity and secularization – in any case, it is an account of what happened and not just, I take it, for Shakespeare. I'm sure you've thought about – it may have well been what was happening in England, but he must have thought more broadly that it was also –

CANTOR: It was happening in France, as well. This is contemporaneous with [Jean] Bodin, and in France –

KRISTOL: He wanted to show the movement. So Richard II is this pious and ineffectual king deposed by Bolingbroke who becomes Henry IV who then yields – produces Henry V who, I think, is – when I first saw it, the first couple of times, really – and read it – you know it's this great success. It's the one – I guess in Shakespeare's plays, isn't it? It seems almost to be an unalloyed success story. But when you think about it for a minute, it also has a bit of the limits of political success.

CANTOR: Yes, he is haunted by the fact – as is said in the final chorus – that “He died young, and we lost everything. All the things we gained in France we lost.” So, it's a good – Shakespeare is always aware of the chanciness of politics, and the unfortunate premature death of a monarch can destroy everything he stood for.

KRISTOL: And also an unjust war in some ways against France which he gets this, as you said, this religious blessing for. I mean, he's not as admirable a figure as the kind of normal view of Henry V as this wonderful, you know, heroic leader.

CANTOR: Yeah, there's the famous business of the killing of the French prisoners, which is bad enough in itself, but Shakespeare sets it up so that Henry first orders the killing of the French prisoners and then reissues the order as if in reaction to something the French had done to give a nice cover to what he's done. Most critics say that's a problem with the text or Shakespeare forgot what he did, but I think that's a very deliberate effort on Shakespeare's part to show something about Henry V.

Incidentally, if you look at the sequence you just talked about, Richard is the monarch – Richard II is the monarch who has this great Christian appearance, but can't back it up with political reality. Henry IV is a Machiavellian schemer and a very effective ruler politically but he loses all the sanctity of the monarchy by having executed the sitting monarch.

The genius of Henry V is that he manages to combine the appearance of a Christian monarch with the Machiavellian abilities of a real political man, and we see that all over the play: his saying, “Oh, I don't deserve any credit for the victory in France. It all belongs to God, let's sing a *Te Deum* here.”

I think Shakespeare is showing something here that you know the true king is the king who can combine a pious exterior with, let's say, a Machiavellian interior. Richard III had tried it. There is that scene where he appears with two monks and is trying to – he's saying, “I don't want the kingship, I want to pray in a monastery,” and, you know, it's so transparently hypocrisy that it doesn't work.

Henry V is an effective hypocrite because most people don't know he is. And it is interesting in the movies, the Lawrence Olivier version, he omits both orders to kill the prisoners because that looks really bad, and even in the [Kenneth] Branagh he omits the second order.

So, people like, you know – good directors understand there's something peculiar going on here. But it's actually those things that are often the key to what really Shakespeare has in mind.

KRISTOL: And Richard III – that's always struck me as – I mean, it's such a gruesome play, almost. And everyone is so put off by Richard III – and he gets his well-deserved comeuppance at the end. But when I went back and looked at it recently, I realized how impressive he is. I mean how incredibly clever.

CANTOR: And just the energy of it.

Well, one of the interesting things in Shakespeare – and we can talk about this when we get to love, for example – is Shakespeare shows that extremes breed the opposite extreme. And, so in this sequence – the *Henry VI* plays, in *Richard III* – we see in Henry VI an overly pious king, a king of whom people say, “You know you'd be great in a monastery, but you're not good on the throne.” And the result of overemphasizing spirituality on the part of Henry VI is to produce this monster, Richard III, who lacks all common compunctions, lacks all common morality.

And I think Shakespeare often shows that – that one extreme breeds its opposite. And it's one of the problems he sees with a Christian politics: that it tends to lose the middle. When you demand too much piety from the king, what you produce is a kind of backlash. The pious king becomes ineffective, and these Machiavellians can just eat him for lunch.

And you know these were real issues in the politics of Shakespeare's day, something they saw in Spain, the – I think, very much behind Shakespeare's mind was the abdication of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, this shocking event in the 16th century when the most powerful man in the world gave up the most powerful position in Europe for the sake of effectively going into a monastery, and that created all sorts of problem from Europe after that. And the whole history of the Spanish regime, which set itself up as the champion of Christianity in Europe – it produced all sorts of problems, especially for England, the whole Armada episode.

There were many things happening in Shakespeare's day, which would lead an intelligent person, like him, to think we've got to damp down the influence of Christianity on politics. He was not the only one saying this. Again, Bodin was saying it in France. We were going to get it soon in Hobbes and Locke, and I suspect there were people saying it in the inner circles in the Elizabethan regime.

It's true that Shakespeare was following in broad outlines what really happened. I think he is endorsing it. I think he is showing here the process was necessary, that England could not settle down and be a nation if it was being torn apart by divided loyalties. And the medieval feudal regime was a formula for divided loyalties.

KRISTOL: And I guess with Henry V the nation gets united in the sense also of the different parts of the nation, right?

CANTOR: Yes, yeah – one of the striking things in the play is it's so aware of the differences among the Welsh, the Scottish, the Irish, and the English, and Henry is a master of using the war to bring men together.

This is the moment when nations – when the modern nation-states began to emerge, chiefly in France. France was really the first nation-state in the true sense of the term, and England was moving towards it during Shakespeare's lifetime and, again, a lot of it had to do with the civil wars eliminating the people who stood in the way.

Because what Henry VIII was able to do was replace the sitting aristocratic families with people who were directly loyal to him, and he used the church lands to reward them. But he would basically take his tailor and suddenly make him Earl of Surrey. And then he had an aristocracy that flowed from the crown. So instead of the barons making the king, the king made the barons.

KRISTOL: The king not trying to really save the souls of the subjects but rather, you know, leaving that a little – be more relaxed, you might say –

CANTOR: Henry V says on the eve of the battle of Agincourt about the soul, "Every subjects' is his own."

KRISTOL: That's interesting.

CANTOR: It's an amazing statement but I think it's what Shakespeare is getting at, and Henry's whole argument in that scene is, "I can't be responsible for all these souls. I'm just going to win this battle for you. But don't place the responsibility for your soul on me."

KRISTOL: So, that's a kind of Protestantism, ahead of the fact.

CANTOR: Yes, it's – you know there are all these theories that try to claim Shakespeare for Catholicism. I find that most implausible in the light – I think Shakespeare was very much endorsing the movement, in

effect, toward Protestantism in England, because he saw it as solving this church-state problem. Exactly the sort of things that Henry VIII was doing in creating the Anglican Church. It was happening elsewhere in Europe as well. They wanted to settle the religious question, one way or the other, so people would not go to war over religious issues.

And, you know, that's the view that Hobbes and Locke took, and that America is founded on that view. I think you can see, in effect, an argument for separation of church and state in Shakespeare, though at the time that could only be accomplished by the national religion, to just settle the issue, you know; it's the Treaty of Westphalia ahead of time. The king decides what the religion of the country is, and then we leave it at that.

II: *Measure for Measure* (24:11 – 30:25)

KRISTOL: Say a word about the play I always – one of the ones I always liked the most – the only one I actually ever taught a little bit – *Measure for Measure*, which is very much, of course, on this topic. Set in Vienna, which is, what, the Holy Roman Empire – with a Duke who is nominally pious and the city has gone totally to pot, so to speak.

CANTOR: Yeah, I mean *Measure for Measure* is a very strange play, and I actually don't feel I – I'll say I don't feel I understand fully. Really, I don't understand it. But I have some theories about it. I've certainly thought about it.

I always like to start with one fact about *Measure for Measure* – we're right near the Folger Library here with its great collection of first folios. There is a unique first folio. It comes from Valladolid, Spain. It was used by Catholic deprogrammers. They would get Englishmen who had been converted to Protestantism, and they wanted to get them back to Catholicism. And they used Shakespeare's plays; they thought this would be a way to teach Catholicism, get people back in the fold of the Church. And what's so fascinating about it is we have annotations in it, little bits of censoring, lines that evidently these sort of Inquisition figures thought were heretical and they wanted to cut them out. *Measure for Measure* is simply ripped out of that first folio.

KRISTOL: Oh, that's perfect.

CANTOR: Yeah, I mean, you know like "we can't even begin to deal with this one, we've just got to rip it out." Now, I – you know we can't prove anything from that fact but it's such a curious fact. When I discovered that, I was just astounded.

So, I mean insofar as I understand the play – and okay, again, set in Vienna, that would mean the Hapsburgs, this business of retirement in the city seems to call to mind Charles V. It seems to me it's a play about the impossibility of a fully Christian regime and that it shows, again, this problem of the extremes.

Harry Jaffa has written very well about this in his essay, "Chastity as a Political Principle in *Measure for Measure*," which is in the volume, *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, that is, the attempt to create a pure Christian morality in the city produces this backlash.

KRISTOL: By Angelo. So, the Duke steps aside because the city is – He's too philosophic, he likes to spend his time allegedly reading or thinking. He's let things fall apart and then he yields to this stern puritanical type.

CANTOR: And so you get a law against fornication. And, so in terms of the play – Jaffa's very good about this – the nunnery is shadowed by the whorehouse. The heroine Isabella is a nun, and then we have whole scenes set in a brothel with a pimp named Pompey.

Anyway, so you've got a situation where the attempt to maintain chastity produces sexual luxury, and it's

as if – again, what’s lost is the middle in the play. Women are either chaste or whores. By the way, this is Hamlet’s view of women, as well. It’s this tendency to think of perfection and damnation, that Christianity encourages, that a woman is either perfectly pure or she’s perfectly damned and whorish.

What’s missing in the city is marriage. That you could unite sexuality with a morally respectable and civically useful institution, and indeed that’s what the play tends toward. It ends with people getting married, getting into this healthy normal human range of experience.

And I think it suggests you can’t expect people to give up sex entirely. You don’t want them to indulge in sex, exclusively. The answer is marriage – that was its whole secret, that it allowed a social, productive life, producing children to be united with a sexual impulse.

So that’s my overall take on it. There are a lot of details in the play that still puzzle me, but I do think it’s a good illustration of what I was talking about – this danger in a kind of Christian absolutism, that by demanding perfection, you essentially thrust the people who aren’t up to perfection into an unregulated and really base way of life.

KRISTOL: It’s also such a Machiavellian play. I mean, the Duke puts this guy in charge who he knows is going to misbehave. I think that’s pretty clear when you read the play carefully. He knows already that he’s abandoned the woman to whom he had been betrothed or promised to be married because she didn’t bring him the money that he thought she was going to have. So he’s not – he pretends to be a pious guy, Angelo, but he’s – doesn’t seem like such a great guy.

He overdoes it by – to say the least – and turns out to have lecherous impulses behind all that piety. And then the Duke comes in as the savior, disguised as a monk, I think, or a friar; and then ends up getting the girl, who was at the beginning of the play going into the monastery. So he sort of takes her away from that – seems to. It’s very – I guess, it’s a little ambiguous at the end whether she accepts his proposal of marriage.

I’ve always thought the Duke might have had that in mind from the beginning, there’s a kind of personal plot there, too, on the part of Duke to get this –

CANTOR: And it is like Ramiro d’Orco and Cesare Borgia in Machiavelli that you let someone else do the dirty work and then execute him and be – Because, really, the Duke has a problem at the beginning, the city is going to hell in a hand-basket. The whole sexual situation has gotten out of hand. So, he needs to bring in a guy who will clean it up by going to the extreme; and then the Duke can come in and offer moderation as the solution.

And I think that that is a pretty good and Machiavellian strategy on the part of the Duke. Plus, he gets the girl in the end. And, again, the superiority of marriage in the resolution of the play.

III: The Comedies (30:25 – 59:06)

KRISTOL: So if one was interested in Shakespeare’s politics, I think, the history plays, the tragedies, are kind of obviously important, and one can draw lessons about political life and religion and politics, and monarchy and republics and all these issues. But I think as someone myself – who comes from political life – the comedies seem like a different world and a somewhat more mysterious world. I enjoy seeing them, but I find it much hard to know what to make of them.

CANTOR: I think that’s a fair statement, and I think I’m going to get to politics indirectly through the comedies.

Shakespeare wrote what’s called “new comedy,” and that means the fundamental comic situation in the plays is: “Boy meets girl. Boy and girl fall in love. They have problems with their parents. And then finally they get married.”

He does not write –

KRISTOL: Is that based on – is that what Roman new comedy was?

CANTOR: Yes, in other words, it actually goes back to Menander. He does not write “old comedy,” which would be Aristophanes, where the comedy is overtly and directly political.

It’s very interesting that basically he’s working in the tradition that comes out of Menander and came to Shakespeare through Roman comedy. Shakespeare’s first comedy, *Comedy of Errors*, is based on a Roman comedy, *The Menaechmi*, and so you just – you have to begin with that fact, that the most important thing in Shakespeare – in Shakespeare’s comedies is romantic love.

But it does start to get interesting there because he’s trying – I think he’s developing a very profound and thorough-going critique of a certain notion of romantic love that was predominant in his culture. It’s called courtly love, it’s called Petrarchan love, there are many names for it, but it’s basically the kind of love that is first developed in the literature of the Middle Ages. It first appears in the 12th century in France and the poetry of the troubadours. It’s then picked up in what’s called chivalric romance, the poetry of Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes, late 12th century in France.

These are the stories of Tristan and Isolde, so basic to German narrative, the stories of King Arthur and especially of Lancelot and Guinevere. This is the dominant secular literature of the Middle Ages – was this literature of romantic love, and it was a tragic love.

In most of these stories, the love is adulterous. It’s often a story like Lancelot falls in love with Guinevere, the wife of his king. Tristan falls in love with Isolde, the wife of his king, King Mark.

But they’re stories that are not simply incidentally tragic. The love is pointed to tragedy all along because only death can validate the love. These are stories in which love becomes an absolute and infinite value. It’s the first poetry we know of, at least in the West, that uses religious imagery of poetic experience. This is when you start to get the idea, “Oh, our love is like heaven, and we are like saints and we’re on a pilgrimage to love.”

And you get this domination of these themes in European poetry. Dante picks up on it, and it’s the core of his poems about Beatrice, *La Vita Nuova*, it’s the core of the *Divine Comedy*. Petrarch picked up on it and his sonnets to Laura are examples of this.

These are all stories of thwarted love, of unfulfilled love; love becomes identified with suffering in these stories. It is almost always separated from marriage, though occasionally somebody will come along and say, “Well, you know, marriage does not preclude love.”

There’s this famous guy, Andreas Capellanus who wrote a sort of book we call *The Art of Courtly Love*. One of his rules is, you know, usually love doesn’t involve marriage, but it’s not out of the question.

And this is the literary tradition that Shakespeare inherited and it dominated love poetry throughout Europe – it eventually came to England, the sonnets that were written by Henry Howard and Sir Thomas Wyatt. This is the literary landscape he confronted, and I think he set out to do a job on this understanding of love.

He saw how dangerous it is. He saw that it takes away love’s communal function or we could say its political function, which is to lead to marriage and repopulate the country. There’s something profoundly sterile about this conception of love. It separates it from marriage; it separates it from generation. It makes it seem almost an otherworldly phenomenon. And, so I think a lot of Shakespeare’s plays are devoted to showing what’s wrong with this understanding of love.

Now I'm talking about comedies, but let me mention *Romeo and Juliet*. Because our greatest familiarity with this notion of love is the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, which has all the elements. Not quite adultery, but it's a love forbidden by the parents and that's why they love it. Let's face it. They want to die. They want to die for each other. They're out to prove something. That's the nature of this kind of love, you feel you have to prove your infinite devotion to your lover by dying for him or her.

And Shakespeare sets up that play very cleverly so both Romeo and Juliet get to die for each other. You know, it's presented as this tragedy of fate, and yet what is so distinctive is their disaster-mentality. They're always one step from suicide. "Oh, the party's delayed – I guess I'll kill myself." Or, "Gee, she seems to be asleep, I guess I'll kill myself." And I think here Shakespeare is showing the tragic outcome of this understanding of love, that if you want your love to be an otherworldly phenomenon, yeah, it's not going to work out in this world.

So, in his comedies he shows –

KRISTOL: Also in *Romeo and Juliet*, am I wrong? I just happened to see it. It's such a deep and beautiful love, and, of course, when it's taught that – and there's some truth to that – and the poetry is so beautiful. But, it's also the case, it turns out, that, I guess it's Romeo, right, who had just been in love with someone else like two weeks before, and they're basically teenagers. And so it's both very tragic – but it's also superficial in a way.

CANTOR: In fact, when Mercutio, Romeo's friend, hears about Juliet he says of Romeo, "Now he is for the numbers Petrarch flowed in." You said the version you saw was cut, but in the text Shakespeare raises the specter of Petrarch, that this is Petrarchan love, these kids are reading poetry and getting their idea of love from that and it's disastrous.

Today, we would say, you go to movies and watch television and get your idea of love from that. Shakespeare's very interested in this phenomenon of where life imitates art, and where he saw it in his day it was in love, that people were getting their idea of love from books and it was a bad idea.

Now, by the way, this is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, if you want to see if there was something broader going on here. Cervantes was the second greatest writer living in this time. By the way, it's curious, Cervantes and Shakespeare died on the same date. They were on different calendars, the Catholic and Protestant calendar, so they died two weeks apart, but they died on the same date, April 23, 1616.

KRISTOL: Is there any reason to think each knew – one knew of the other?

CANTOR: There's no indication that Cervantes knew Shakespeare. Shakespeare knew of *Don Quixote*. Shakespeare's lost play, *Cardenio*, was based on an episode of *Don Quixote*, so he did – *Don Quixote* was known well in England.

Anyway, I bring up *Don Quixote* maybe to make this point simpler, to see this is what Cervantes was doing. Here are the two greatest writers of the age, both saw a real literary problem in the world, that people were getting their ideas of love from books and it was false ideas and it was leading to disaster.

Now, again, I'll use Cervantes here to give you the bigger picture. What Cervantes combines in *Don Quixote* is a critique of this romantic idea of love with a critique of medieval chivalry, and that shows you the political implications of this.

This is a two-pronged assault on the medieval world. It's given us a false idea of politics, it's given us a false idea of love. And in both cases, they follow from the infiltration of the ideas of Christianity into areas like love and politics.

And, so this is the relation of the history plays to the comedies. The critique of medieval chivalry in the history plays is the mirror image of the critique of this Petrarchan love in the comedies, so it does have

political implications.

But, anyway, looking at the comedies, again and again, you have stories of characters who want to be Petrarchan lovers, and that means they don't want to get together, they're enjoying so much the frustration of being kept apart and all these emotions pumped up. And so Shakespeare shows how these lovers again – and they crave disaster, they crave suffering, and the comedy is there to get them to be practical.

You know they're always – for example, the idea of romantic love, Petrarchan love, Dante, is love at first sight and once and for all. We are – you know we still have this idea in our culture that there's only one perfect love for you and, you know, you got to find it.

Shakespeare shows how disastrous that belief is, and the comedies – you know, "Romeo and Juliet" is the formula for tragedy. "Romeo and Juliet and Ted and Alice" is the formula for comedy. If you can just increase the options – and Shakespeare's comedies tend to take the form of a dance. The characters pair off in mistaken ways that aren't going to work, and they have to learn to reshape their devotion in a practical way.

And the principle of tragedy is "no substitutes." It's Juliet or nothing. The principle of comedy is "Hermia, Helena, which one can I . . . ?" The reason *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ends happily is the lovers are willing to settle for what they originally said was nonnegotiable.

Tragedy is a world of the nonnegotiable. Comedy is the world of the negotiable, and the negotiable of love where you eventually realize: you know what?--the advantage of this woman is: she loves me and she'll marry me. *As You Like It* is wonderful in this way. The main lovers, Rosalind and Orlando go into the forest – they find this couple, Sylvius and Phoebe, who are acting out the roles of courtly lovers. Phoebe is the disdainful mistress of courtly love, and Sylvius is the devoted follower. And it's going nowhere.

And it has to work out that Phoebe falls in love with Rosalind dressed up as a boy, and then be disdained by Rosalind as the boy Ganymede, so she'll learn, you know, it's not so great to be turned down in love, and she'll eventually accept the boy next door.

That's one thing Shakespeare shows in his comedies, people won't accept the boy next door. They won't accept the rational marriage. They're always striving for something infinite and absolute and impractical.

And, so the difference of the comic vision is that Shakespeare allows life to be the governing principle, and that means marriage, generation, the family, and that's the way in which this artificial understanding of love that's from literature actually is performing a politically bad function in the community. It's actually standing in the way of people going about their lives, performing the normal, natural function of pairing off, mating, having children, and contributing to the continuity of the world.

In a world of Romeos and Juliets we'd be out in one generation, if all lovers can do is commit suicide. And, so Shakespeare makes us laugh –

KRISTOL: And *Romeo and Juliet* does seem to bring the two together. Because as, I think maybe you said, this tragic, disastrous love affair happens in a city, which seems to have a disastrous political order.

CANTOR: Yes, it's another case where the city is divided by noble families, also divided by the church. You'll see there the friar who is working at cross-purposes with the prince, and that prince, I think, is a pretty Machiavellian prince, and by the end of the play, he's got all his enemies under his control.

The warring families have agreed to settle. The friar – the prince has caught him with the goods and he shuts up that friar, and that friar will do what the prince wants him to do from then on.

KRISTOL: Anyway, on the comedies so –

CANTOR: Yeah, so – I mean I think –

KRISTOL: But they're set in sort of these mysterious nowhere lands, some of them –

CANTOR: Well, part of that is that Shakespeare wants to look at this problem of love, and the politics would necessarily complicate that. *Twelfth Night* is particularly interesting because usually Shakespeare puts in some complication. The parents object – in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the parents want the women to marry other people. In *As You Like It*, there's a feud between the parents.

It's funny, I think, *Twelfth Night* is an experiment to say, "let's take away all obstacles, and these lovers will create them." You've got Duke Orsino, who's the duke – I mean, the duke can't forbid his marriage, he's the duke. You have Olivia, who's a rich woman. They have no problems, and still it turns out the duke loves being rejected, he loves to wallow in melancholy, and Olivia loves having him wallow in melancholy, and they're going nowhere.

And what's really interesting in that play is Shakespeare introduces these identical twins, a boy and girl, Viola and Sebastian. And the way it works out is Viola meets Olivia – masquerading as a boy, Cesario – and she falls in love with him as a boy, and the – she has to experience again what it is to be disdained.

Again and again, Shakespeare's comedies work that way, that these people who are indulging this masquerade as lovers – they have to understand how it looks like from the other side and – so Olivia falls in love with Viola in a disguise as Cesario, and the duke falls in love with Cesario, becomes very close friends with him, not realizing it's a woman in disguise.

And my formula for that play – I think it's important to remember in the comedies – is Shakespeare remodels romantic love on the model of friendship. That, in this case, Olivia bonds with Viola's Sebastian because he's an unthreatening young man, she feels comfortable with him. She feels in a position of superiority. Orsino bonds with Cesario because he thinks it's a male friend, and they learn to get to know each other, they learn to like each other, they develop a sympathy when they're not playing these roles.

Shakespeare's comedies are about people who are locked into artificial roles that they've learned from reading books about chivalry and courtly love, and they've got to break out of it. So the comic confusion of identity often brings that about.

Olivia falls in love with Sebastian, meeting him in the tamer form of his sister, Viola, and Orsino falls in love with Viola, having met her in the form of Cesario. I can't believe I'm keeping this straight, but I am.

KRISTOL: That's impressive.

CANTOR: So, in both cases a friendship develops and that's what Shakespeare thinks romantic love should be like. It should be between two people who know each other.

At the beginning of the play, Olivia and Orsino are conducting their love at long distance. Olivia – Orsino writes sonnets and sends them to her, and she marks "return to sender." There's no interaction there. Nothing's happening. It's this figure of Sebastian and Antonio that introduces some movement – excuse me, that's *Merchant of Venice* – this figure of Sebastian and Viola that introduces movement.

And, so in a number of the plays, *Merchant of Venice*, even in a way, *Romeo and Juliet* – you see the contrast between friendship, usually male friendship in the play, and these artificial forms of romantic love. And I think Shakespeare is showing what lovers need to do is become friends. They have to know each other as people, not as roles in literature.

And a lot of the comedies, they reform the view of love by remodeling on friendship. We can call it a

reformation in the religion of love, if you want to connect this to what we were saying about Protestantism. The courtly Petrarchan love is a very Catholic idea. The Catholic Church actually hated it, but these authors were Catholic, and it grew out of a Catholic situation. In many ways, it's very interesting to see in the Protestant England of Shakespeare a turn on this form of courtly love.

Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare's older contemporary, wrote his *Amoretti*, they are sonnets written to his wife, and that was like a revolution in literature. "Could you believe that the guy's writing sonnets to his wife?" And it was a very Protestant gesture, and you see this happening a lot in England. You can see it in Sir Philip Sidney's sonnets to some extent as well. They're remaking these Catholic notions of love, these otherworldly notions into something much more practical and compatible with national life.

Again, it is a kind of reformation in the religion of love. And now you start to see its connections for the larger politics that Shakespeare's dealing with.

KRISTOL: And is there an education of the characters in these comedies, or do they just sort of stumble into the right outcome?

CANTOR: No, the education I was talking about, you know – you're the disdainful mistress of Petrarchan poetry. How would you like to feel disdained? That's the education. A lot of – and a lot of the identity shifts are there to give people a sense of how it looks from the other side.

Now, in *As You Like It*, again, Orlando meets Rosalind in the disguised form of the boy Ganymede, and they form a friendship. He is tongue-tied when he meets Rosalind after his big wrestling victory. She comes on to him. He cannot come up with a single pickup line because he's just overawed: this is the woman I love, I can't speak to her.

And, so the way *As You Like It* works out, he meets Rosalind disguised as Ganymede and they can just talk to each other as man to man. And then Ganymede offers to help him court Rosalind, namely, herself, and she takes him through the process and he starts spouting this poetry, you know, "What would you say to your Rosalind?" He says, "Oh, I would die for her."

And he says – Ganymede says, "Come on, people die, but not for love, you know." And he talks about the great Hero and Leander [story], he drowned in the Hellespont, it had nothing to do with love. And she basically takes him through what a woman is like and how she does respond. So, yeah, these plays are deeply educational on love.

KRISTOL: Isn't it – it seems to me, based on a very superficial knowledge of it, the women usually either know more at the beginning or certainly get educated much more than the men. And that's generally true, I think, of comedies maybe through the centuries, that the women are superior to the men in some ways.

CANTOR: One of my students had a wonderful [idea] – tragedy is when men rule the world, comedy is when women rule the world. And there's a profound truth to that. Because tragedy is about absolutism and people who die for their principles.

Comedy is about compromise, negotiation. It points in the direction of the family. It is – and the women in the comedies are almost always the motive force, Portia in *Merchant of Venice*, they're bringing about the happy ending because they're willing to see through these artificial poses.

KRISTOL: And one has the sense sometimes that in comedies that the men don't deserve the women, that women are superior. I think it's very true of Jane Austen too – the women are superior to the men. Now, they have to end up getting married, and the world is the world, so they settle, so to speak, for these men. And these men are impressive in certain ways I suppose, but they're –

CANTOR: Jane Austen is the closest thing to Shakespearean comedy and she's doing the same thing. She is taking the English romanticism and the artificial ideas of love produced out of that and she's

making fun of it. She makes fun of the idea of love at first sight, for example, makes fun of these Gothic novels and their conventions.

These are really interesting moments where again there are many points in which life imitates art. There are many ways in which we get our ideas of something as important as love from reading books, watching movies, watching television.

And there have been artists like Jane Austen, like Cervantes, like Shakespeare who see part of their mission as correcting for this.

Now, the odd thing is they, in fact, perpetuate romantic love. In fact, *Romeo and Juliet* is now the main conduit of this idea to our culture, the infinite love, and people romanticize *Don Quixote* and we have “Man from La Mancha” and “Dream the Impossible Dream.” I mean, in many cases the heritage of these works, I think, is directly contrary to the original intent.

Still, I think Shakespeare and Cervantes accomplished a lot. The sonnet writing died after Shakespeare, at least, this enormous vogue for it. Milton continued to write sonnets, but they were political.

But I think they did a lot to correct the excesses of this literature. But I mean it’s tremendously attractive this dream of the perfect love, the once-in-a-lifetime love, the infinite love. So, it’s interesting that people like Jane Austen have had to come along and start the battle again.

A lot of the 19th-century novel actually deals with false ideas of love. Dickens is another example of that. So, I think this is something Shakespeare could do. I don’t know if he really reformed English kingship or how much he transformed English politics, but I really do think he accomplished something literarily, at least, exposing how ridiculous some of this erotic posturing is.

KRISTOL: I think *Romeo and Juliet* obviously survives and is powerful and a much beloved play and the movies. But it sort of survives in a way as – A, it’s tragic; and, B, it’s sort of – I won’t say it’s not taken seriously, but it’s kind of teenage, you know, it’s fanciful. I mean it’s not – it’s not really a model, the way I take it, courtly or chivalric love was thought to be an actual model of how you should live your life as an admirable, impressive human being in the 13th century. Wherever, I mean that – so I think it sort of – maybe you have to let it survive somewhat because the instincts and passions are still there, you know –

CANTOR: And what Shakespeare allows in the comedies is a romantic aura to surround these things. You can’t reduce it to the barest sexual essentials. I show in my essay on *As You Like It* that for Touchstone and Audrey, the comic figures in the play, I mean their ideas, yeah, we’re in the country, we’d like to have sex, but we better get married and then the marriage turns out to be a phony, anyway.

And, so Shakespeare again in *As You Like It*, he’s looking for a happy medium between the totally artificial love of Phoebe and Sylvius and the totally sexual love of Touchstone and Audrey, and Rosalind and Orlando manage to combine some degree of poetry and spirituality with a recognition of the realities of romantic love.

And the god of wedding, Hymen, appears at the end of the play to marry everybody in sight. It’s not simply a convention that Shakespeare’s comedies end with marriage. Lord Byron had a great comment on that – he said, “Tragedies end with death, comedies end with marriage; there’s really not much difference as far as I’m concerned.”

But in Shakespeare that comic ending shows the way in which the community has been freed of artificial conventions and brought back more in line with nature, and that means the natural repopulation of the community.

KRISTOL: But also a little sense of what’s been lost or what’s missing, do you think?

CANTOR: Yes, and I think that's in Austen as well. I mean, it's very interesting that people talk about "comic relief in Shakespeare's tragedies." I invented the term "tragic relief in Shakespeare's comedies." That is, very often at the end of a comedy somebody is excluded. You know the major – tragedy is exclusive.

Usually, the greatest people in the community cannot survive; the community cannot reform if they're still alive. Comedy expels major characters –

KRISTOL: Tragedy –

CANTOR: Tragedy. Comedy is inclusive, and it tries to bring people who have been bitterly fighting, maybe to the death, but there's always a couple of people – Shylock would be a main example, but even Antonio at the end of *Merchant of Venice*. But Jacques in *As You Like It*, Malvolio at the end of *Twelfth Night* – that's what I call tragic relief. Shakespeare makes a point of reminding us comedy is not complete. That somebody is always left out of the comic formula.

This, by the way, is one of the reasons, I think, Shakespeare is the only genius at comedy and tragedy. He understood this point. In his tragedies, he always reminds us – a bit of comedy. And in his comedy, he always reminds us – a bit of tragedy.

He's showing us that neither view of the world is complete. It's interesting that the reason people write one or the other is they basically have either a tragic or comic view of the world. I think Shakespeare stood above that and understood life is never perfect tragedy; it's never perfect comedy. And that his plays are in that sense abstractions. These are in a way artificial patterns, and he tries to remind us of that artificiality.

It's a wonderful moment, the song in *Twelfth Night* that's quoted in *King Lear* as well, Shakespeare's always within the plays, moving back and forth between tragedy and comedy.

IV: Tragedy, Comedy, and *The Tempest* (59:06 – 1:18:43)

KRISTOL: And is there any play or set of plays that do literally – that transcend tragedy and comedy?

CANTOR: That's *The Tempest*.

KRISTOL: That's *The Tempest*.

CANTOR: I mean that's what – now, again, his last plays are very complicated – what he's doing there. But I believe and many other people believe that they are best understood as post-tragic, that is, they're examining what happens after tragedy.

This is an odd thing to say, but the nice thing in a tragedy is that you die. Really, if you think about it, you confront this horrific moment – Othello discovers he mistakenly killed Desdemona for the wrong reason. King Lear has seen his daughter Cordelia is dead. You know, in a way, it's easier to die then, and life isn't that way. People often have to live through what we call tragedies, and, in a way, the genre we call tragedy offers too neat a resolution by having the death of the hero coincide with the moment of tragic recognition. Lear doesn't have to die when he does. Othello doesn't have to die when he does.

And, so in these late plays, what Shakespeare was doing is examining what would happen if you lived beyond the tragic moment. By the way, Goethe does this in *Faust* as well, the relation of Faust [Part] II to Part I. Some of our greatest writers had pursued this question.

And, so the great theme in these last plays is death and return, characters who you think have died come back. They're plays about a second chance. Tragedy is when you don't get a second chance. And it's probably not accidental that as he was growing older and Shakespeare was coming to the end of his

career he chose to think about this.

Now, these plays are very complicated, and again, I would like to say I don't understand them fully, but maybe I just don't understand them. But *The Tempest*, I feel I have worked out and it is Shakespeare's attempt to create a genre that transcends tragedy and comedy.

It is often called "tragicomedy." And, so these plays have been called tragicomedy, and the term "tragicomedy" was available in the Renaissance. Italian critics spoke of it. So, it's not even a word that was foreign to Shakespeare.

And Shakespeare's extraordinary problem in *The Tempest* – that's very much related to what we were saying about Plato and the *Symposium*. Plato understands that the problem dramatists have is the need to do exciting things on the stage.

When Socrates criticizes dramas, specifically tragedy in Plato's *Republic*, he's basically saying that these artists have to show something passionate on the stage or something ridiculous and they have to appeal to the audience's sense of the ridiculous or the audience's sense of what's awesome and tragic.

And basically what Plato's indicating – you can't put a philosopher up on stage. There would be nothing more boring than watching a guy think for two and a half hours. Now, of course, it's the great genius of Plato's dialogue that he found a way to dramatize the life of a philosopher in those dramas.

I think Shakespeare, maybe not directly reflecting on Plato here – but, to me, *The Tempest* is about a philosopher-king. Prospero was a philosopher who, thanks to his attention to philosophy, didn't pay enough attention to politics and has been deposed by his brother.

Now, the play is how this man who has pursued philosophy will return to kingship in Italy, technically to his dukedom in Milan, but obviously it's a form of kingship. And Shakespeare is essentially dramatizing the philosopher in his play, but how can he do it? And especially how can he deal with this problem of having exciting action in the play?

And there he comes up with a brilliant structural solution that Prospero will create an over-plot into which he'll – Shakespeare will fit a bunch of his old tragic stories. Ferdinand and Miranda are going to act out *Romeo and Juliet* again where they think their parents are opposed to their marriage and they'll do anything for each other.

Prospero's brother Antonio has already played out *Hamlet*, he has deposed his brother. He actually – you know like Claudius and the elder Hamlet, he's tried to kill his brother – come to the throne. The other character, Alonso's brother, anyway, he's going to try to kill this king – a scene from *Macbeth*.

The play actually echoes lines from Shakespeare's tragedies, and Shakespeare is showing he has all this tragic material, and the difference is that Prospero is in control and none of these tragic plots are allowed to come to fruition. And, as a result, all the focus is on Prospero's genius in manipulating that. It's the genius of a playwright, it's in a way the genius of a philosopher who understands all these human tragedies.

That's the way the play solves a dramaturgical problem and also takes us into a realm beyond tragedy. We see a world in which the tragic outcome could be prevented by a philosopher-king ruling the situation.

KRISTOL: One who has supernatural powers and therefore, maybe as with Plato's philosopher-king, one who would never quite exist. So, only Shakespeare can do this, but –

CANTOR: *The Tempest* is a profoundly utopian play. In general, the comedies, as opposed to the tragedies, are utopian because they abstract from a lot of the political facts that prevent these happy endings. But *The Tempest* is an extreme example of this.

This happens in a dream world. It happens on stage. Shakespeare does everything in that play to indicate it's merely a play. It's the only real-time play in Shakespeare. It takes place in the two and a half hours it takes to stage it.

It's remarkable that Shakespeare is often criticized for not obeying the classical unities. I think this is meant to be his last play, even if it isn't technically the last play he wrote. But I thought he's going out in a flourish. "And, so you think I can't write neoclassical drama, here it is. Top this one."

KRISTOL: And it's about him in some way, right?

CANTOR: Yes, it's about a magician.

KRISTOL: I mean his ability to –

CANTOR: And Prospero's ability is a theatrical ability, and it is Shakespeare's translation of Plato's philosopher into Shakespeare's equivalent of it, which is the magician-playwright. It's an astounding play.

KRISTOL: And it is close to his last play chronologically?

CANTOR: Well, it's in within a year or two of his retirement. Maybe he wrote *Henry VIII* later, maybe he wrote *Two Noble Kinsmen*? Though in both cases, he was then collaborating with John Fletcher. I think they drug him out of retirement because they were worried about the box office when Shakespeare retired.

He was – since he had – he was a shareholder in the theater, said, "Okay, I'll keep you guys going." I think he was trying to train John Fletcher to replace him, and John Fletcher did. Shakespeare was the most popular playwright of his generation. John Fletcher, when he linked up with Francis Beaumont, became as popular as Shakespeare and the theater company went on to dominate the next decade. So – but I think *The Tempest* is an attempt to round out Shakespeare's career.

KRISTOL: I'm curious, I mean Shakespeare is both so accessible in some ways, there are all these wonderful stories and poetry, but also daunting, you know, 37 – is that how many plays there are? – or 38 – I guess depending on whether you count the co-authored ones. And such a variety of topics.

You, yourself began with the Roman plays, I guess, really in terms of your serious engagement with Shakespeare, is that a good idea for other people?

CANTOR: I think it is, but let me just say that the way to begin with Shakespeare is to see the plays. And unfortunately productions are not uniformly good. But it's tough to ruin Shakespeare, and most big cities, Washington among them, New York and Boston, you know, have good Shakespeare productions. And there are now many good productions available on DVD, and they're shown on television.

KRISTOL: You don't object somehow as a purist to seeing them on DVD –

CANTOR: No, no, especially when you can see a better performance on DVD than you can find locally. And, so I really do think – you know, begin with any play that moves you. Most of them are moving in one way or another. I think seeing –

KRISTOL: And watch them rather than read them first?

CANTOR: Yes, I would. Because you've got to understand that they are dramas. You've got to really submit yourself to the spell of the poetry and then see what catches your interest.

Now, I'd just say in my case it's sort of an accident that my junior high school was doing *Julius Caesar*, and I read the play and I simply thought this was the greatest thing I'd ever seen in my life. The poetry was so beautiful. The rhetoric was so magnificent. Everything about it was introducing me to the world of

Rome. It made me want to go out and read about the historical Julius Caesar.

It happened again because of my grandfather that I had some scholarly editions of Shakespeare at home. I began reading Shakespeare criticism in the ninth grade, because I was lucky enough to be in a household with so many books because of my father and my grandfather.

And I started to see, you know, hey, there are arguments here. And the funniest thing about it is I'm reading in this Arden edition – these are the original 1900 Arden editions of the play – that, "Yeah *Julius Caesar* is good, but *Coriolanus* is better." And I remember saying, "Oh it can't be, who is this idiot? There's nothing better than this play. What is this thing *Coriolanus*?"

And then one night I'm listening to WBAI, the radio station in New York, which used to broadcast Shakespeare plays on radio. And I tuned in in the middle and I'm listening to this thing, and I've never heard anything like this. This is a rhetoric beyond belief. This is just better than anything. But what is it? And then suddenly there's this point where they give this new name and everyone proclaiming, "Caius Marcius Coriolanus." And I say, "So this is the thing, it really is better than *Julius Caesar*!"

It's so funny because these – again, these are little accidents but that's – I got captivated by this play, and then I read it seriously, and then, of course, I get to Mansfield's course at Harvard and I get to write a paper on it and the rest as we say is history.

But I'll say this much for the Roman plays, that they really introduce us to Shakespeare's greatest genius, which is understanding things alien to him. When he portrays Englishmen, well, our reactions say, "Well, that's just the way the English are," not realizing that in many ways he's helped shape English character and he's shaped our perception of English character.

But what really struck me from the start was these Romans were a different breed of men and women, and that really meant a lot to me then. I've always liked literature that allowed me to travel, that took me to foreign places and to understand things I didn't understand.

And, so the nice thing about – for me studying in one place – is it led me to study Rome and I was reading Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy* and reading Livy, reading Montesquieu on Rome, reading Roman history. To this day I read Roman history. I love the History Channel when it shows shows about Rome.

And it, you know, turns out I discovered that Rome was central to civilization and there's a reason our banks look the way they do or why we have a Senate or –

KRISTOL: The Capitol.

CANTOR: Or a *Chicago Tribune*. And, so really my study of Shakespeare's Roman plays ran in tandem with my study of Rome.

And that's the thing I feel about Shakespeare. This is the greatest literature ever written, but it's more than literature: it's teaching us about the world and teaching us about aspects of the world that we are not immediately in touch with.

Again, just hearing the rhetoric – you know, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears." And those fabulous speeches in *Coriolanus*. It introduced me to just a language, a mode of speech that I'd never heard before, and put me in touch with the ancient world which has been so important to me in other ways.

It happened that a little later I was reading Nietzsche on the ancients. Walter Kaufmann, the great translator of Nietzsche – it's very important – he has a book called *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* – where he writes an essay on Shakespeare and the ancients and showed how Aristotle's idea of the

magnanimous man is relevant to Shakespeare.

That was tremendously informative to me and helped me understand Aristotle. But Shakespeare has been my portal into understanding a lot of other important phenomena throughout the ancient world, ancient philosophy. Seth Benardete, in his book on the *Iliad*, you know, begins with *Coriolanus*, and says this is our best modern entrance into the ancient world.

So, again, you can start anywhere you like in Shakespeare. You know, I don't recommend, you know, *Titus Andronicus* and *Merry Wives of Windsor* as your best introduction, but even those would work. And obviously all these great plays – *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* and so on – are great.

But for me the Roman plays had the advantage of showing me that this is a man who's showing us the whole world and not just his own time. And again, I think it's particularly valuable that he opened up the whole ancient world to me and helped me in reading Plato and Aristotle and Thucydides and Homer, for that matter, that introducing me to this notion of nobility, in many ways very foreign to this world. I mean, to put it mildly, *Coriolanus* is not a humble man. And, yet, Shakespeare makes a case for the greatness and grandeur of his self-conception, and I found that very liberating to understand that possibility.

So, again, I feel the Roman plays are a good place to begin. But, you know, find your way into Shakespeare one way or the other.

KRISTOL: Final question. You've taught Shakespeare for 40 years, predominately to American students at the University of Virginia, mostly, but also at Harvard and elsewhere. I'm curious – I mean a thing that struck me – I think I read a little bit about this once: Shakespeare has always been pretty popular in America, which is so striking because you think America of all places – no tradition of nobility, feudalism, the ancient world is, you know, even further away from us than it is presumably from England or Europe – and there's something impressive, I think, about the fact that Americans have a certain taste for this all the way back.

But I'm just curious – your students – do you see much in the way of change in their reaction to Shakespeare overall – over this time? Is there something surprising about their reaction to Shakespeare when you teach it, or is it not that different?

CANTOR: Shakespeare is the one permanent star in the firmament of literature and, you know, it's not surprising that Americans have embraced Shakespeare, because everybody has embraced Shakespeare. There's not a people on the earth who do not enjoy Shakespeare's plays.

When I was in Japan in 1991, I saw *King Lear* in Japanese. It was magnificent. One of the greatest Shakespeare productions I've ever seen. Now, it is interesting, I think, the Japanese are closer to feudalism. I think Kurosawa – Akira Kurosawa's films of Shakespeare, *Ran*, *Thorn of Blood*, and even in a way, *Kagemusha*, which is not directly based on Shakespeare – I think they are some of the greatest Shakespeare films ever, precisely because he understand feudalism in a way that Europeans and American directors don't.

But still the fact is these plays genuinely have universal appeal in a way that almost nothing ever has. Shakespeare is able to touch on those common elements of humanity that in fact we all share. People weep at many of the same things, like death. They laugh at the same things, like the death of their enemies.

But there's enough of common humanity in us and enough of that common humanity in Shakespeare's plays that they can speak to people everywhere. At the same time though, he's able to stretch everyone's imagination to understand ways of life that are alien to them.

So, I hadn't thought about this. But the only thing I teach where the students continue to respond with the same enthusiasm is Shakespeare. With other things, things vary in time – and you can see trends and

fashions – but Shakespeare is a sure-fire hit.

And it's funny – I find it kind of symbolic – the first course I ever taught was my last year in graduate school in Harvard. It was called "Shakespeare and Politics," and last fall I had the honor to teach again at Harvard, and I taught almost the same course and it was called "Shakespeare and Politics."

And, so that would be – what would it be? – that would be 1970 versus 2013, yeah, that's about 43 years apart teaching the same course. I'll get it right eventually, but I do think this is, you know – people worry about Shakespeare. "Oh, we need Shakespeare requirements."

And, you know, Shakespeare doesn't need our help. You know it's John Milton, Geoffrey Chaucer, they need our help; that's where you see the curriculum collapsing.

Shakespeare stands on his own two feet and you know, basically you can't keep students away from Shakespeare courses. They're the most heavily enrolled at the University of Virginia. They genuinely respond to Shakespeare. The poetry is so beautiful, the drama is so powerful, and they all can relate to it on some of the most basic levels.

KRISTOL: That's an appropriate note on which to end. So, thank you very much, Paul, for participating in this CONVERSATION.

CANTOR: Well, it was my pleasure.

[END]