

CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

Conversations with Bill Kristol

Guest: Paul Cantor, Professor of English, University of Virginia

Taped July 14, 2017

Table of Contents

[I: Coriolanus 0:15 – 29:50](#)

[II. Julius Caesar 29:50 – 55:46](#)

[III. Antony and Cleopatra 55:46 – 1:13:30](#)

[IV. Nietzsche and Shakespeare 1:13:30 – 1:36:48](#)

I: Coriolanus (0:15 – 29:50)

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm very pleased to be joined today by Paul Cantor, English professor at the University of Virginia, author of a new book, excellent book, [Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy](#). We'll talk about a lot of the themes that Paul discusses in this book today. Your first book was called [Shakespeare's Rome](#). A lot of variation, there, in your work over the last 40, 45 years, you know.

CANTOR: Well, it's –

KRISTOL: There is a huge – the truth is, as watchers – viewers of these previous *Conversations* know that there has been – you've ranged widely in and deeply [in] popular culture, many, many other authors.

CANTOR: I'm coming home in this book.

KRISTOL: You are coming back to Shakespeare's Rome. So let's talk about that. So why Rome? And then why Shakespeare? But why Rome first?

CANTOR: Well, Rome is just an incredibly important part of our culture to this day. It's one of the reference points in our culture, in our politics. We're not very far, here, from a building that's called the Senate.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: It shows that our political order was to some extent modeled on the Roman Republic. We have newspapers that call themselves "the Tribune" – the *Chicago Tribune*. That's another distinctive Roman institution. Rome, in many ways, has shaped the world we live in. People are still fascinated with it. I think on the History Channel, Rome is the third most important topic they cover after Hitler and ancient aliens.

KRISTOL: Yes, but UFOs must be way up there.

CANTOR: Yeah. But Rome is right there next.

KRISTOL: That's good.

CANTOR: And so it is fascinating, this city that conquered the entire Mediterranean world. People have just been interested in its success. All these great people it produced. Cincinnatus, who got a city in the Midwest named after him –

KRISTOL: Right. Right.

CANTOR: It's astounding when you look around the world – every time you go into an old bank building, it's got Roman columns up there so –

KRISTOL: Russian czars, that's Caesar, right?

CANTOR: Yes, yes, yes, and the Kaiser, the German term for "emperor."

So we've had many a country that has claimed to inherit the Roman Empire. Czarist Russia did. Even England claimed to be "the third Troy." Troy, Rome, England. So it is there, our heritage. And to understand the world we live in, we have to understand Rome.

KRISTOL: So why Shakespeare? I mean you could have studied – and you have studied, actually, a million, many, many other authors, Machiavelli.

CANTOR: Yeah. But this is partially biographical. My first serious encounter with Shakespeare was ninth grade, in what was then called junior high school. And we studied *Julius Caesar*, and I just loved it. I mean, it was just a revelation to me. I had never seen anything as great as this: the language, the drama, the power of it.

And it's actually funny, as I read about it, I found these critics mentioning something called *Coriolanus* and they said it was even better, another Rome play. And I said, "Nothing can be better than *Julius Caesar*." And one day – this is back in New York – I'm listening to WBAI, and they used to broadcast Shakespeare plays on Saturday nights.

KRISTOL: That was another era, right?

CANTOR: It certainly was. And I'm hearing a play and I don't know what it is, and it is fantastic – the rhetoric, the powerful speeches – and I'm saying, "How am I going to find out what this is?" And then suddenly there's that moment when Caius Marcius conquers the Volscian city of Corioli, and they proclaim him Coriolanus, and you hear it three times: "Coriolanus, Coriolanus, Coriolanus!" I said you know what, this is the play everybody said was better than *Julius Caesar*, and I decided it was.

And then all I had to do was read *Antony and Cleopatra* and I had the three great Roman plays.

And what I came to conclude was that Shakespeare really cared about Ancient Rome. There's a theory among many people that his Romans are just Elizabethan Englishmen in disguise. Just put a toga on an Englishman and you got Shakespeare's Romans. But no. I began to understand he really was setting out to portray the Roman world and all its *difference*, and that's what interested him. And I found, the more I studied Shakespeare, the more I could learn about Rome.

KRISTOL: Yeah, what struck me in the book, one of the things, many things that struck me – it's a wonderful book with many discussions; Nietzsche features prominently, and we'll get to that in a minute. But it was that it's not really Shakespeare's Rome, in the sense that it's as much about – Shakespeare

was very interested in Rome and had a view of Rome as contrasted with other things, modernity and other human possibilities. But you emphasize the difference between the two Romes that he portrays.

CANTOR: Yes. And that is another thing that –

KRISTOL: So *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

CANTOR: Yeah, we say Rome, but in fact there are two great phases of Roman history: the Republic and the Empire. The Roman Republic lasted roughly from 500 to 50 BC. And then there's an interregnum when it's making the transition. And then the Western Roman Empire lasts another 500 or so years. It's in the 400s AD that Western Rome dissolves.

And it's interesting that when we visually picture Rome today, we are picturing the Empire. That is, when you think of Rome, you think of the Colosseum; you think of Hadrian's Tomb; you think of the Pantheon. Those things date well into the Empire. I mean, in fact, the Colosseum was built on the ruins of Nero's palace to reclaim the space for the city from this Roman emperor who took it to himself.

And all that beautiful grand Rome is actually Imperial. Almost nothing survives of Republican Rome. There's a couple of temples in a place called Largo Argentina and a couple of temples down by the Tiber.

But famously, Augustus, the first emperor, it's said of him, "He found Rome a city of brick, and he turned it into a city of marble." And so the really grand Rome we think of in terms of the architecture, that's the Empire.

But, when we think of emperors, we also think of people like Nero and people like Caligula and a lot of decadence in the Roman Empire. And the Roman Republic is the city of republican virtue, of all the – especially the martial virtue.

And there's a kind of confusing point here, that much of the empire was acquired during the Republican Era. It was the great armies of the Republic that basically conquered the entire Mediterranean world. And though the Empire advanced under the emperors up until the point of Hadrian, who called it quits and said we've gone as far as we're going to go, it was largely a holding action. And Shakespeare seems to have been interested in the contrast between the Republic and Empire.

In fact, my first book I called *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire*. So that, if you take the three plays he wrote –

KRISTOL: Yeah, let's just walk through those.

CANTOR: Yeah. Just to sketch it out, *Coriolanus* is the first historically.

Again, the order in which they are written is probably *Julius Caesar*, around 1600, 1599; *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra* maybe 1608, 1609. But I discuss them in historical order. And to me it –

KRISTOL: And there's evidence that he conceived of them as a trilogy, or at least, once he had written the first one –

CANTOR: Yes. I mean it's a –

KRISTOL: that the latter two – he certainly was aware he had written *Julius Caesar* once he wrote, you know, *Antony and Cleopatra*.

CANTOR: Yes, yes, yes. And there's no hard evidence – though, we know he wrote two tetralogies. That is, in the history plays, to take the better known one, *Richard II*, *Henry IV, Part I* and *II*, and *Henry V* tell a

continuous story of the fall of the Plantagenet dynasty, the rise of the House of Lancaster. It shows that he did think in terms of larger units than the single play.

And in a way, I am claiming in a book curiously called *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy*, that these three plays form a trilogy. And my evidence would be that in *Coriolanus* he deals with the founding moment of the Roman Republic, which came into being when the Romans threw off Etruscan tyranny. They were being ruled by kings from Etruria, and the last of them, Tarquin the Proud, had a son who raped a Roman maiden, Lucretia, and that was the last straw for the Romans. "These tyrannical foreign kings, they rape our daughters and our wives." And they threw out the Tarquins and created a republic.

And what *Coriolanus* deals with, the characters in that play –

KRISTOL: And historically, *Coriolanus* comes a little bit after the founding of the Republic but not –

CANTOR: Well, it's at the time. The Tarquins are living memory. Coriolanus, as a boy, fought against the Tarquins.

KRISTOL: So really it's early Republic.

CANTOR: Yes. And what makes it so important a moment – and for example, [Machiavelli](#) concentrates on it in his [Discourses on Livy](#), his account of Republican Rome – is this is when the people got their tribunes. And that is the distinctive institution of the Roman Republic, which makes it what's called a *mixed regime*: that is, it's a combination of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy.

The Roman Republic had as executives two consuls who were vested with the executive power. They were the generals of the armies, which was the fundamental executive power in those days. That was, if you will, the monarchical element of the regime.

And then there was the Senate, which was the aristocratic element, consisting of basically the large landowners who deliberated on Roman policy and basically ran things.

But then there was a popular assembly. There were these so-called *plebeians*, who were not slaves; they were free, but poor and agricultural – they worked on the big estates and so on. And they felt left out of the regime. As the play opens, as *Coriolanus* opens, they're starving from a famine and they rebel wanting grain. And what they're given instead of grain is tribunes. And this institutionalized a democratic component in the Roman regime, because the tribunes were the representatives of the people. That's why so many newspapers fancy themselves –

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: You remember the *New York Herald Tribune*, for example.

KRISTOL: I do. Yes. Yes.

CANTOR: And of course still the *Chicago Tribune*. But the tribunes had remarkable power in a regime that seemed to be ruled by these aristocrats: Namely, they could veto anything the Senate did. And they were also sacrosanct. They could not be killed. Now, you would think *everybody* could not be killed; but, in fact, they were uniquely positioned that it was a *blasphemy* to kill one. Not that the patricians didn't occasionally kill a tribune. But it gave them a lot of power that you had to think twice before killing one. Rome politics was pretty rough back then.

But it did – you know, Machiavelli concentrates on something that was unique to the Roman regime, to give that much power to the people. And so I think, you know, Shakespeare chose that moment to portray.

Now, jumping ahead, he wrote *Julius Caesar*, which deals with the end of the Republic, the beginning of the Empire. It's the whole issue in the play that Julius Caesar is taking over the city. Rome had been so determined to avoid one-man rule. They hated the name of kingship. But here, Julius Caesar, he had already been appointed dictator for life at this point, and he's thinking of getting crowned, and we see the conspiracy to restore the Republic and how it fails.

And then *Antony and Cleopatra* portrays the beginning of the Empire; has the character Octavius Caesar, who went on to become Augustus Caesar, first official Roman emperor.

So if you look at the three plays he chose to write, he seems especially interested in the Republic versus Empire issue, and specifically how the Republic had come to be, how did it go out of existence, and how did the Empire emerge.

KRISTOL: And my sense is that somehow – maybe this is an American bias – but people are kind of – most thinkers seem to have been pro-Republic and anti-Empire. One has Empire one thinks, you know, living off the greatness of the acquisitions of the Republic and gradual decadence, hastening near the end.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: Republic is the kind of noble, public-spirited Romans.

CANTOR: Yes. And I mean, just to show how all-pervasive this is, this is *Star Wars*. The noble Republic and the corrupt Empire.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: That motif has just –

KRISTOL: But which grows out of the Republic.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: So the Republic can't be that noble.

CANTOR: Exactly. I mean and that's such a –

KRISTOL: And is that a –?

CANTOR: Yeah. I mean, what Shakespeare shows is the corruption of the Republic produces the Empire. And specifically, I'd say the acquisition of a foreign empire corrupts Republican institutions and, therefore, produces an imperial regime. That, I think, is the deepest theme of these three plays as a whole.

And it surprises people when I claim that Shakespeare was, shall we say, a republican with a small R. That is, the standard view of Shakespeare is he lived under a monarchy, and he must have supported monarchy. Well, he did not go in the street and agitate for the overthrow of Elizabeth I. But in fact, I think he was part of the stirrings of republican thinking in late 16th century England. The people who dispute this forget that, in 1649, Britain became a republic. Somebody was thinking about it.

KRISTOL: For 11 years or something like that.

CANTOR: Yeah, yeah. And, well, Cromwell failed – and by the way, there’s a very good book that came out, fairly recently, by a man named Andrew Hatfield called *Shakespeare and Republicanism*, and he, you know, openly challenged this assumption. Part of the problem is the word *republic* was not used in Elizabethan discourse. But they spoke about *commonwealth*. That was the term they used. And I’ve lived much of my life in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts or the Commonwealth of Virginia.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And you can see the people who came over to the United States were republicans in many ways. They called it a commonwealth, built in the 1650s, wrote, “A Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth” [1660, John Milton]. So, it’s funny, people, they don’t see the word *republic* and they think no one’s talking about it, but they actually are.

And so I think Shakespeare is part of what’s called the classical republican tradition, which goes all the way back to Rome itself and stretches forward to Montesquieu and the Founding Fathers well into the 19th century.

He was very impressed by republican virtue. And for him, the central contrast is between citizens and subjects: that in a republic you have citizens, and in an empire you have subjects. And from a political point of view, that’s the problem with empire. It’s very nicely crystalized by Cassius in *Julius Caesar* when he says to Brutus, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings.”

And that’s the republican principle that human beings have control of their own destiny. That was the point of the republican system. So for example, the consuls. It really does surprise us, there were always two consuls and they served for one year. Imagine if the presidential term was only one year.

KRISTOL: Right. And there were two of them. Yeah.

CANTOR: And that there were two of them.

But the idea was anything to avoid one man from becoming too powerful. So you had the two consuls; they had to agree on major stuff, like going to war. They could veto each other. They only lasted one year, and you could not succeed yourself as consul; you could become consul later.

But the idea was to stock Rome with a lot of people who have had top-level executive experience, and they would pride themselves – You know, we talk – I think, what do have we, six living presidents?

KRISTOL: Maybe that’s right. Yeah.

CANTOR: Yeah. Yeah. They would pride themselves: “We’ve got 42 living consuls.”

KRISTOL: Right. Right. Right.

CANTOR: And the ideas was nobody can say, “I’m indispensable.” And if someone starts saying, you know, “You can’t win a battle without me” – they say, “Well, we got six guys who won battles. We’ll make one of *them* consul.”

In some ways, if you look at the consulship, it gives you an idea of what Republican Rome was about. First of all, give opportunities of the highest glory to everyone. You know, again, we like to say every American can dream of being president. Maybe, but when you have two consuls changing every year, it sort of was more reasonable to think – if you’re a patrician – that you can, that you have a reasonable expectation of being consul.

So then, for example, you don't assassinate a consul to make room for yourself. It's astounding the degree to which assassination became political practice in the Empire. And Shakespeare shows it in *Antony and Cleopatra*. At that point there's not quite an emperor, there's a triumvirate. Octavius, Lepidus, and Antony are sharing rule. And there's a guy called Pompey, and one of his subordinates says – they have them on a barge for a conference, and says, "I'll kill them all. I will make you the lord of the whole world." And it's actually a very Machiavellian moment because Pompey says, "You should have done it, and then I would have been okay with it, but now that you asked me, I have to say no."

Again, that's true to what happened historically at that moment. But it shows that assassination was going to become regularized under the Empire, when you had one emperor, an emperor for life.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And no term limits except by assassination. Again, that's a perfect contrast between the Republic and Empire, and it's what Shakespeare shows is the difference. Participation, the nature of the Republic was widespread participation in the regime.

Now, not everyone had full participation. Again, pretty much only patricians could become consul; although, at a few points in Roman history, they let plebeians become consuls. It was actually a trick by the patricians to give the plebeians a consul and let them see what a disaster it would be, and then in a hundred years they wouldn't ask for another plebeian consul.

But even the common people had a role in the regime. If you were ambitious among the common people, your ambition was to become tribune. And it's a very honored position. Shakespeare shows the tribunes in *Coriolanus* absolutely basking in the glory of their position. One of the patricians says to them, "You are ambitious for poor knaves' caps and legs." And at some point they're adjudicating things, and they feel very proud that the people are coming to them to solve their problems.

So the Roman Republic really satisfied the ambitious side of human nature and the –

KRISTOL: But not Coriolanus.

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: What about Coriolanus though? I mean, the person, not the play.

CANTOR: Yeah. Well, I mean –

KRISTOL: The person in the play, I mean.

CANTOR: Yeah. I mean, here – this is why it's a tragedy. And I always have to remind people that Shakespeare wrote tragedies. In that sense, didn't have a big optimistic view of the world. And *Coriolanus* is a tragedy of the perfect Roman who's too perfect for Rome. That is, he has been bred as a patrician warrior; he has had remarkable military success, even as a young man; he got the Congressional Medal of Honor for bravery, the equivalent of it.

And as the play opens in the first act, the Romans have been attacked by their neighbors, the Volscis, and Coriolanus is one of the leaders in the army, and he more or less conquers a Volscian town singlehandedly. That is, when he charges the city of Corioli, closes the gates behind him. And he's trapped in the city.

And everyone said, "Well, that's it for him, he's dead," but he's such a great warrior that he defends himself and gets the gates open and then the Romans pour in and they conquer the city. That's how he gets the name "Coriolanus," for conquering the city. So he is the great warrior, just what Rome wants.

And you do have to remember this is the world of hand-to-hand combat, and combat by swords. At one point, when he's having trouble with the plebeians and the patricians are worried about it and he says, "On fair ground, I could beat forty of them." And that's a boast, but not an empty boast. The implication in the play is that this man is of such physical strength and courage that the odds are pretty much forty to one. He's got a forty to one handicap.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And this is what Rome wants, and of course, he's rewarded. He's nominated for consul. This would be the normal procedure, that a man like this would become consul.

But, unfortunately for him, there's an electoral process, in which he has to go in front of the plebeians and get their endorsement by twos and threes. And his greatness makes him *too* proud. When they ask him why he's there – "What has brought you here?" – he says, "Mine own desert, not mine own desire." A little bit arrogant.

And the people still approve him, and then the tribunes organize the people to get him *denied* the consulship. And again, here's this man who did everything Rome asked of him, and who won this great victory, in some ways, symbolically, singlehandedly, and they banish him.

And he turns around and says, "I banish you." And he goes over to the Volscis, which in itself is a great, daring thing. And he basically goes to their leader and he says, "By all rights you should kill me. I've killed all your people, but if you let me, I'll conquer Rome for you." And he leads the Volscian armies against Rome and defeats them one after the other.

And here's the interesting thing that Shakespeare suggests: *this man* makes a difference. When he leads the Roman armies, they win; when he leads the Volscian armies, they win. It's much like Alcibiades, the Greek who went over from Athens to Sparta. And indeed, the source of all of this is Plutarch's *Lives*, where the life of Coriolanus is paired with the life of Alcibiades. So you can see what Shakespeare is focusing on. He really is concerned, again, about human agency: Are there men who make a difference? And Coriolanus is one of them.

But he's tragic for the reason that he goes beyond, you know, the normal range of humanity. They actually treat him like a god when he comes back from the victory at Corioli. The city is almost ready to turn itself over to him. So, in some ways, Shakespeare explores the tragic situation of the great man in a community, and it's very interesting how it develops that, you know – Coriolanus' view of Rome: "Rome, I can't live with it; I can't live without it." Rome has to say of Coriolanus, "Coriolanus can't live with him; can't live without him." That's the tragic situation, that what makes this guy great in some ways makes him too big for the community. They're too dependent on him. He's too proud. And again, he's not the nicest guy in the book.

But on the other hand, as I try to point out to my students, he is heroic in the way, for example, Achilles is heroic. He is heroic in that ancient mold where what's fundamentally heroic is the great warrior and that is what he *is*. All his problems come from trying to adjust to peacetime society.

Shakespeare was fascinated by that subject: How does a great warrior adjust to peacetime? It's the theme of *Macbeth*; it's the theme of *Othello*. It's a central theme in a number of the history plays, including *Richard III*. I think he saw it in his own lifetime with the great Elizabethan captains like the Earl of Essex and Walter Raleigh, that they were very ambitious and militarily successful, and then they had a hard time putting themselves in the peacetime regime – where they were, in fact, subordinate to a woman, in the case of Elizabeth I, which made it even harder for them. And I think Shakespeare's experience of that attracted him to this issue of – you know, it's the issue that in American politics would be Douglas MacArthur or George Patton.

And again, when my students question, “Why are these Romans so impressed with military heroes?” I say, “George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, Dwight Eisen—”

I mean, even in our relatively peaceful, democratic, middle-class regime, we’ve elected a lot of generals to the highest office. So why wouldn’t the Romans do it?

And we have had these cases – I think MacArthur may be the most Coriolanus-like figure in our history. Although, the movie *Patton*, which is written by Francis Ford Coppola, I think is the most Shakespearean movie of the modern world, because it portrays Patton very much like a Coriolanus figure and very hard to control, and yet a great general.

KRISTOL: And so the *Coriolanus* story is partly about the Roman Republic, partly about the tension between, I guess, a truly great man and the republic –

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: – or any city I suppose?

CANTOR: Yeah. Yeah. And Shakespeare I believe, you know, thinks of politics as tragic for just this reason: that it demands a certain character, especially from military leaders, which is not fully compatible with their peacetime politics.

And so again, the community: it can’t live without Coriolanus. This is the person that stands in between them and being conquered by the Volscis. And yet it turns out they can’t live with him either.

In a weird way, it’s kind of like a bad marriage: can’t live with him; can’t live without him. And it’s the same point. He really wants to do everything alone. Yet, he is a general. He needs an army. And although he lasts for a couple of minutes alone in Corioli, if the Roman soldiers didn’t come to back him up, he would have been killed. And it’s one of the hardest things for him to deal with, that he both despises the common people and yet needs them as a general.

II. Julius Caesar (29:50 – 55:46)

KRISTOL: And so then we skip a few hundred years and get to Caesar, another great general.

CANTOR: Yeah. And here *is* where things change as a result of having an empire. That is – Machiavelli makes this point; a number of analysts of Rome do – that the turning point in Roman history was the prolongation of military commands. That is, this formula – consul, one-year term – by the time you’ve conquered Spain, it takes more than a year for your army to get there.

And so the consulship system worked only when Rome was just conquering Italy, when they were marching, effectively, on neighbors. But this is typical of Rome. They didn’t have a written constitution, and they were very practical, pragmatic, and they recognized the problem. And so, essentially, they created what we call the *proconsul*: that you couldn’t be a consul for more than a year, but if you were out on a military range, they would prolong your command. And you’d, in fact, become proconsul in a territory. And as a proconsul, you stand in the place of the consul.

And now generals were ruling an army for five years, ten years, and they started to develop personal relationships with their troops. Again, if you’re – in the consul system, your commander in chief changes every year; you’re basically loyal to Rome, and the consuls stand for Rome. Now – Julius Caesar was a great example of that. You’re in Gaul for five, ten years with Julius Caesar; he’s actually paying your salary.

That's the other aspect of this. Having an empire, they prolonged the military commands. These great generals, like Pompey and Caesar, developed personal loyalties, and they were enormously wealthy because they essentially had the taxes from these regions they conquered, which they then used to pay their armies. Crassus, who was another one – the First Triumvirate was Pompey, Julius Caesar, and Crassus. Crassus, who was legendarily the richest man in Rome, said, "You ain't got money if you can't pay for an army."

And I like to – it's very hard to compare wealth over a millennia, but I like to say, Bill Gates is rich, but he couldn't pay a fraction of the U.S. military budget. And what you can say of these rich Roman patricians, essentially they paid the military budget out of their own pocket. Now, they were putting in that pocket all the wealth of Egypt or Gaul, and so on.

But you see what happens here: they're not only leading the army continuously for five years or so, they are paying the army out of their own pockets, and that develops the kind of loyalty.

So, of course, the famous moment where Julius Caesar is crossing the Rubicon. Now what that meant: the city of Rome was a sacred precinct. You could not bring your army into Rome, and the dividing line was this Rubicon River. You know, the obvious idea was you don't want an army showing up under a potentially hostile general. And the great moment when, you know, Caesar sees his destiny was he marched his army on Rome. No one thought he would do it. And when he did it, Rome was helpless. They had no defense. Pompey, who was his great rival, fled, and many of the senators fled the city. Pompey went to Greece where he had *his* army. And Caesar was actually able to claim Rome.

But that's what started happening in the last hundred years of the Republic. This didn't start with Julius Caesar, and Shakespeare doesn't show this, but you had a number of these generals who were essentially brokering their power in Rome by using these private armies. And this is what subverted the Republic.

The reason the Republic is so important to the United States is that it developed the notion of checks and balances and separation of powers; this whole theory of preventing one-man rule, you know, consul checks the other consul, the tribunes check the consul, and so on. And that system was undermined when you got a man like Caesar, who is fabulously wealthy. Again, it's very hard for us to understand it, but he had, like, all the income from France, and that, for example, meant grain. He had the right to the grain, which he then distributed to the people.

We talk about "bread and circuses" as the policy of the emperors. It actually begins in the late Republic. Pompey built the theater. Before the Colosseum, the biggest theater in Rome was Pompey's theater – which is now an apartment building, by the way, in Rome. But those imperial policies were begun by these giants of the late Republic, that they used their wealth – free grain to everyone in Rome, stage gladiator games. So they became enormously popular.

And that subverted the regime – many of the ancient accounts, including Plutarch, argued that it was wealth that corrupted the Republic. That, famously, these – yeah, okay, we associate palaces with Rome. These Republican leaders didn't build palaces. All those palaces date from the era of the Empire. They actually lived rather frugal lives. They didn't dress in purple or sit on golden thrones. The Republican leaders were leaders of the people in that sense. Becoming that wealthy led to problems. It was harder to check and balance that.

KRISTOL: So Caesar is taking over and the last gasp of the Republic is the plot to –

CANTOR: Is the plot to assassinate him by people like –

KRISTOL: And what do we learn from Shakespeare's play on that? I mean what's the reflection on the Republic and Empire? I mean –

CANTOR: Well, you know, the most difficult question is whether Shakespeare thought the Republic *could* be saved at that point. I like to put the question in these terms, that it raises the issue, *do men make history or does history make man?*

That is, the premise of Cassius is that men make history. And indeed, once they've killed Caesar, they run around the streets proclaiming freedom and Cassius says, "How many ages hence shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er in states unborn and accents yet unknown!" Which is literally true, because it's actually –

KRISTOL: Being acted.

CANTOR: It's being acted in front of us. He's saying we're going to be really famous; we changed history. Plays are going to be written out about us. We're going to be seen as heroes.

And yet, of course, it doesn't work. We can talk about why it doesn't work, but just, basically, Shakespeare is wondering *could the Republic be restored?* A lot of people, including Plutarch, claim at that point it was too corrupt. It couldn't be restored; that history had passed the Republican conspirators by.

But, it is interesting that Shakespeare shows them making a number of decisions, and they're all wrong. And you have to say, if these decisions were wrong, if they made the right decisions, *could* they have saved the Republic? And it's very interesting, in the pattern – in every single case, Cassius proposes the right thing, and Brutus overrules him with the wrong thing.

KRISTOL: And Brutus is a more impressive – not impressive person but a more –

CANTOR: Has the better reputation. The interesting thing that Shakespeare shows about a –

KRISTOL: So that's interesting, right?

CANTOR: – shows about a conspiracy – And again, I believe that Shakespeare had read Machiavelli's *Discourses*.

In any case, he seems to understand conspiracies, that they are a combination of the high and the low. Cassius is envious of Caesar and he's open about it, and that's when Caesar says, "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look." And you do *need* somebody like that in conspiracy. Cassius initiates it. Brutus on his own would never have done this.

But Cassius knows he needs Brutus because of Brutus's reputation for being honorable. And Brutus is lineal descended of the Junius Brutus who led the rebellion against the Tarquins and established the Republic. And that's presented as a fact within the play. And if you want to restore the Republic, who's better than the descendent of the guy that founded it?

And the conspiracy needs the low-mindedness of Cassius and the high-mindedness of Brutus. The problem is that Cassius himself is in awe of Brutus, doesn't want to lose him in the conspiracy and, in some ways, is just willing to listen to him as this famous Roman.

So that, for example, one of the things – I mean, obviously the mistake they make is they don't kill Mark Antony. And that's Brutus overruling Cassius: "Our course will seem too bloody."

But one of the decisions they make, Cassius proposes Cicero. Let's get Cicero part of the conspiracy. And Brutus nixes it. No Cicero. Now, Cicero was the greatest orator in Rome. As we know from the great scene with Brutus and Antony speaking at Caesar's funeral, ultimately the conspiracy fails because of a

great speech Antony gave. If they'd had Cicero on their side – in fact, he was a specialist in attacking Antony. There's a famous series of speeches he gave called "The Philippics," modeled on Demosthenes' speeches in Athens against Philip of Macedon. And these were a set of speeches viciously attacking Mark Antony. He could have handled Mark Antony.

It's interesting, the only reason Brutus gives for not having Cicero join them is he never joins something he didn't start. Now, it would have been easy enough for Cassius to convince Cicero that he came up with the idea of a conspiracy. Clearly, Brutus doesn't want to *share* the conspiracy with anyone who's as famous as he is. Cassius isn't; none of the other conspirators are.

So again, when I was taught this in junior high, we were taught that Cassius was all evil and Brutus was all good. And Shakespeare doesn't work that way. He's able to see the two sides of any character, and even the great and noble Brutus, who isn't doing this out of self-interest, has a certain kind of self-interest in it, that he wants to be known as the leader of the conspiracy.

KRISTOL: And a certain philosophic view, almost. Doesn't Brutus have – not a philosophic view but kind of a –

CANTOR: Well, he is – that's another interesting issue about the play that I really only discovered in writing this book. That is, when we get to it we'll see that, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Rome gets Egyptianized, because it's conquered –

KRISTOL: Yeah. Well, we can talk about that now, but yeah, say a word about –

CANTOR: Yeah. But I'm just – and what I didn't realize, in *Julius Caesar*, Rome is Hellenized. There's the famous line when Casca, one of the conspirators, is explaining that scene where Antony stages the crown business, that's – it's kind of a trial balloon, will the people accept a king – and Casca said "Well, what did Cicero say?" just really sounding him out.

And it turns out, "tis Greek to me." Cicero "spoke in Greek," Casca says. "I can't tell you because I don't know Greek." By the way, historically, in the sources, Casca knows Greek. So Shakespeare's emphasizing this.

And it is a very odd moment when you think about it. I mean, obviously what's going on is a form of esotericism that Cicero doesn't want people to hear him say nasty things about Caesar so he says it in Greek to his friends.

KRISTOL: And Cicero, also a great transmitter of Greek philosophy, obviously.

CANTOR: Yes. And in some ways a follower of Plato, an Academic. And it suddenly dawned on me, Shakespeare is saying something about the Rome of 50 BC compared to the Rome of 500 BC. Nobody speaks Greek in *Coriolanus*.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: In fact, Coriolanus, when he's arguing against the plebeians, says, "We don't want to do what they do in Greece. In Greece they give grain free because they're a democracy, but we're an aristocracy." He has nothing but contempt for the Greeks.

But, you know, I was reading Roman history, and in fact, Rome was Hellenized by its encounter with the Greeks. Again, the Rome we picture – the Colosseum, the Pantheon – is a heavily Hellenized Rome, *after* they've conquered Greece and brought back painters, sculptors, architects from Greece. The architects of the Pantheon were two Greeks, and so on.

But the Rome that precedes it, of which we have almost no remains, would look so un-Roman to us. Because it was un-Greek. And indeed, when you start to look around the Rome of *Julius Caesar*, there were all these Greek influences. Cassius is an Epicurean. Brutus is a Stoic. There's a Cynic that interrupts Brutus and Cassius when they're arguing.

And, again, Cicero was a Skeptic, or an Academic Skeptic. He has a very brief scene, only about ten lines. What he does in that scene is express skepticism about the Roman gods. There's a huge storm and Casca is afraid the gods are punishing us. And Casca says, "Don't tell me it's natural." And Cicero says it is. He says, "Men misconstrue things after their own fashion, missing the things themselves," or something like that. He basically is saying that's not – the gods don't speak to us in thunder. It's just thunder. It's two clouds colliding, as even the Greeks understood.

And it did dawn on me, you see this is an aspect of how a republic is corrupted by its foreign conquests. And a surprising number of the patricians objected to Roman imperialism. They said, "Stop conquering all this foreign lands. It's going to come back to bite us." Cato the Elder is a great example of that, who said, "These Greeks are going to destroy us with their Greeky ways."

And it's quite remarkable that, you know – *Coriolanus*, there isn't anything close to philosophy in that city. And I like to say that Shakespeare is – these plays are tragic because they're showing us tradeoffs. The Roman Republic is a war machine, and it was impressive that it conquered everybody. And even if they were defeated, they bounced back and no one ever defeated them for good, and that impressed people. But, it's narrowly focused on war, and there were no philosophers in the Rome of *Coriolanus*. They're not sending their children to study philosophy. In fact, it's said of Coriolanus' son Marcius, "He'd rather hear the drum than listen to his schoolmaster." The Roman education is purely military in the early Republic.

But in fact, by Caesar's time, Romans were sending their children to Athens. Ovid's parents wanted him to be a lawyer, so they sent him to Athens to learn rhetoric. Unfortunately, he learned poetry; disappointed mom and dad, used his law degree to write poetry, and eventually got banished from Rome by Augustus for his lewd and lascivious poetry.

But, in some ways, it's a great thing. You know, it's philosophy now.

KRISTOL: Yeah, and culture.

CANTOR: Culture. Yeah. And yet, they're paying a price for it.

And what I didn't – you know, people had noticed that Brutus is a Stoic and Cassius is an Epicurean. Allan Bloom has that great essay, [in] [Shakespeare's Politics](#) on *Julius Caesar*, "The Morality of the Pagan Hero," which I have to give credit to. It started me in my analysis of these plays.

And he pointed to the fact – actually Brutus and Cassius are the only characters in all of Shakespeare who are patrons of a named philosophy, you know, who call themselves Epicureans and Stoics, and yet I notice every one of the philosophies is apolitical. Skepticism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, they all recommend retirement, in one form or another, from political life. Even Stoicism, which was the philosophy most compatible with public life. But nevertheless – and of course, Marcus Aurelius, the Roman emperor, the most famous Stoic, and many people equate Romanism with stoicism, but *Coriolanus* is no Stoic. And stoicism was fairly late. I think it begins in the third century BC. It's a Greek phenomenon. Obviously Epicureanism is Greek, as well. And they were reactions, already, to the corruption of political life; the recommendation of Epicurus was "retire to your farm."

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And even Aurelius, you know, that's third century AD., he said, "If you're emperor, be the best emperor you can be. But if you're a slave, be the best slave you can be." In other words, whatever

position you're in, you should be content with it. Striving is the worst thing possible. The great stoic principle is be happy with what you've got and you'll always be happy. And so in many ways, it's an entirely un-republican philosophy. The Republican Romans were not Stoic; they were very ambitious and striving to get as much as they could.

And actually, it turns out that the Epicureanism and Stoicism of Cassius and Brutus are only skin deep.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: They profess it, but they don't really believe it, because if they did, they wouldn't be complaining about Julius Caesar.

KRISTOL: Because they're more republican. Yeah.

CANTOR: Yeah. They are really republicans and deeply political. An Epicurean would say, "It's not worth wasting your energy on politics. You got a nice farm. Go back there and enjoy it." And a Stoic would say, you know, "I'm Brutus. I'm reasonably well honored in this community. That's enough. What do I care?"

KRISTOL: But does it distort their political judgments in the sense that they can't quite come to grips with what's necessary politically?

CANTOR: Yes. Yeah.

KRISTOL: Because they have this high-flown philosophic –

CANTOR: Yeah. It leads them to make mistakes, and actually, in Cassius' case, at the end of the play when they're starting to lose, Cassius says, "I always did hold Epicurus strong, but now I partly believe in things that do presage." And he had seen a bad omen with birds, and he starts to get pessimistic on this. He actually loses the battle mistakenly when he thinks one of his friends has been taken by the Romans, by the other side, the forces of Octavius. And it turns out he's actually being embraced by his own troops. Cassius kills himself in despair, and partly he says, "Well, this is my birthday. It might as well be my death day," which is a very superstitious thing to be saying. So if Cassius had remained true to his Epicureanism, he might have been okay.

But Brutus, his Stoicism makes him fatalistic. And there is that famous piece, "There's a tide in the affairs of man," which leads him to make, once again, the wrong military decision.

Cassius was a Fabian. He wanted the Fabian strategy that they used against Hannibal: withdraw; don't engage them; let them have to live off the land; they'll run out of food, and so on. And Brutus says, "No, we got to fight them, because there is a tide in the affairs of man." And that turns out to be the wrong decision. We know that because this is what Octavius and Antony were hoping for. They say, "They've got the high ground. We'll never be able to – If only they'd come down and attack us," and that's what they do.

And of course, the weirdest thing in the play that Shakespeare shows is this famous double revelation of Portia's death. It's in Act IV, Cassius and Brutus are quarrelling, and Brutus is unusually testy and getting angry with Cassius. And he asked why and he finally says, "Portia's dead." He's abandoned his wife and she's killed herself. And Cassius said, "Well, why didn't you tell me? Now I understand." And he begins by saying, "Of your philosophy you make no use, if you give way to accidental evils." That's Stoicism. Evils are just accidents. They don't go to the essence. It doesn't matter if your wife dies; it doesn't matter if your children die. I mean, Stoicism is a pretty inhuman philosophy. And anyway, we get this scene where Brutus frankly admits that I'm upset despite my Stoicism.

And then the weirdest thing happens. About 20 to 30 lines later, it's a public scene and messengers have arrived from Rome to their army camp. And this character's hesitating to say something and Brutus says, "Come on, give me the news from Rome." And he says, "Okay, if you have to know: Portia's dead and by strange manner." And Brutus acts like he's never heard of this, and he says, "She's gone, but we all must die and knowing that, I'm not upset." And Cassius says, "Wow, you're incredibly impressive. How stoic you are."

And this is *so weird* that many Shakespeare scholars posit an error in the text here. They say Shakespeare wrote two versions, and the guy typesetting from the manuscript didn't see that Shakespeare had crossed out one of them. And there's effort to attribute it to some kind of error, but when you think about it, Shakespeare is showing something very important about Brutus: that the stoicism is a public act.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CANTOR: It is an act for public consumption, and it's one of the problems with Brutus. He *is* noble. I don't want to question that, but he's a little less noble than he pretends to be. And again, I should say a lot of people agree with me on this. The opinion is sort of split 50/50 whether it's a textual error or Shakespeare's showing something about Brutus.

I notice something that I'm proud that I don't think anyone else has noticed, and I'll say it again: "Portia's dead and by strange means."

KRISTOL: Yeah. What does that mean?

CANTOR: If a husband hears that, doesn't he ask, "How'd she die?"

KRISTOL: Yeah. Yeah.

CANTOR: We know from preceding in the scene that he knows she died by swallowing red-hot coals. The reason he doesn't ask is because he knows. But it's glaring that he doesn't ask.

I saw a cheesy detective story where the detective figured out the husband was the murderer because he didn't *ask* the details of the murder and supposedly didn't know them.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And that helped me understand the scene in Shakespeare. So yes, one of the interesting things is, in *Julius Caesar* you would think it's good that philosophy comes to Rome, but in many ways it's a sign of the corruption of the regime, that the focus on politics is weakening.

III. Antony and Cleopatra (55:46 – 1:13:30)

KRISTOL: And *Antony and Cleopatra*, I want to ask about all three of them as ancient plays, but let's just – there's a big change to *Antony and Cleopatra* –

CANTOR: Yeah. This is, again, it's early. It's before the official Empire. I mean Augustus, he's still Octavius Caesar. He doesn't get the title Augustus until several years after the play ends.

But in fact, you see the one-man rule emerging. We got a Second Triumvirate. Now Octavius and Lepidus and Antony have gotten together to rule as three. But three become two, and two becomes one. They eliminated Lepidus first, and then Antony and Octavius duke it out and the last man standing is emperor.

And you see the consequences everywhere in the play. People have now become subjects rather than citizens. One of the conspicuous things in the play – conspicuous by its absence – is the plebeians. *Coriolanus* opens with a big scene with the plebeians. *Julius Caesar* opens with a big scene with the plebeians. The crisis of *Julius Caesar* occurs in the third act when the plebeians essentially decide the fate of Rome, whether they side with Brutus or side with Mark Antony. And as I like to put it, the plebeians vote themselves out of history in Act III of *Julius Caesar*. In effect, they choose Antony and they never appear. I don't know that anyone's actually spotted that before, but Acts IV and V in *Julius Caesar* and the whole of *Antony and Cleopatra*, no plebeian ever appears on stage. They are mentioned twice in *Antony and Cleopatra* but as *spectators*. Cleopatra is worried that Octavius will stage plays about her as a whore. She says, "Some actor will boy my greatness in the posture of a whore," and of course, the joke there is they only had boy actors – a boy actor would have been playing Cleopatra on Shakespeare's stage.

And that, in a way, encapsulates the whole thing, that the plebeians no longer participate in history; they become spectators to it. And in general, everyone in *Antony and Cleopatra* is just watching history unfold, and there really is a sense now that history makes man. Antony complains about Julius Caesar that he never – excuse me, Octavius Caesar – that he never won his battles in person. It was always his lieutenants that won them. And at one point he says, "A child could win with this kind of Roman army." And the sense is that the army's become this machine and Octavius – Julius Caesar was a great battlefield commander. Octavius was not. And there's this sense in the play now and, again, that human agency is gone; there are these broader tides in human history that now come into effect; and that Octavius is not a hero anymore.

KRISTOL: And Antony retires but chooses private life or –

CANTOR: Well, he actually –

KRISTOL: – erotic life, I guess you might say, or –

CANTOR: Yeah. Well, the interesting thing –

KRISTOL: – or is seduced. I mean –

CANTOR: I mean, yeah. Well, he chooses a very public erotic life.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: In the middle of a play, he asked to live a private man in Athens, which has a lot of symbolic force, when you think about it. And in fact, the historical Antony loved Athens. He loved the theater there. This is all in Plutarch and so Shakespeare was aware of it.

But in fact, he could live a private life any time he chose – but no, he wants a new form of publicity. He still wants to be famous. He still wants to be the noblest Roman of all, but now as what we would call a celebrity, as a celebrity lover. At the beginning of the play, in the very first scene, he's with Cleopatra in Alexandria and he says, "Kingdoms are clay." Politics is nasty, it's not – and he says, "the nobleness of life is to do thus," and he gives Cleopatra a big kiss. And he's redefining nobility now so that it is – it's for being a great lover. And he ends the speech by saying, "[In] which I bind, on pain of punishment, the world to weet we stand up peerless."

Many people think he's giving up politics for love. He's actually redefining love as the new form of political preeminence, and he's issued a law – "on which I bind on pain of punishment" – the world to acknowledge we're the greatest. And that's a curiously modern world in *Antony and Cleopatra*. It is a world of celebrity. It's like these movie stars who say I want to be alone.

KRISTOL: Right. Right.

CANTOR: And get rid of these paparazzi. You leave them alone, they go crazy and they want the flashbulbs popping.

And Antony and Cleopatra, they don't want private life. They want this new form of public life where they will be famous for being the greatest lovers in the world. In that sense, it's not a diversion from politics to love. Love becomes the new form of politics.

And that's what happens in the Empire: that you don't want to encourage the old military virtues, the old ambitions, the old aggressiveness. The famous speech about that is when Julius Caesar says, "Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look," to Antony. And says, "Antonius, let me have men about me that are fat." He wants people who indulge their bodies, who aren't, you know, like Cassius. They're lean and hungry; they're ambitious; they're a threat to him. And you really see articulated there the imperial policy – again, connected to this idea of bread and circuses – you want people who now have no ambition, because they have no goal for their ambition, to find enjoyment and maybe some other way of becoming famous, as Antony and Cleopatra do.

KRISTOL: And we don't have, I suppose, a subsequent play on the transition of Rome from pagan Rome to Christian Rome?

CANTOR: No, but it's –

KRISTOL: Something Shakespeare was quite aware of and thought a lot about.

CANTOR: I believe it's implied in *Antony and Cleopatra*. It's in some ways the subtlest aspect of the play that there are a number of references that indicate that these events are roughly contemporaneous with the rise of Christianity. For example, "Herod of Jewry" is mentioned five times in the play – three of which are in the source in Plutarch, but still, why is Shakespeare mentioning Herod of Jewry so many times?

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: There are a number of quotes from the Book of Revelation in the play. Almost the opening lines for *Antony and Cleopatra*: she says, "I'll set a bourn how far to be beloved."

And Antony says, "Then now needs must find out new heaven, new earth." And –

KRISTOL: So it sort of anticipates a kind of otherworldly, love transcending –

CANTOR: Yes, exactly.

KRISTOL: – this world.

CANTOR: That the old Roman world was finite. It had very clear this-worldly goals. You can argue that was the power of the Republic.

Shakespeare is very careful to suppress any references to the afterlife in either *Coriolanus* or *Julius Caesar*. In fact, he omits one that's in Plutarch. I have a whole essay on that in this book. And he shows the one form of immortality in the Republic is fame. That's the highest goal people have: Win battles for the city, you'll get an epic poem written about you; you'll be famous.

That goal has been lost – in part, because Rome *has* conquered the world. It's very powerful in *Antony and Cleopatra* that, in an Alexander the Great-sense, *there are no more worlds to conquer*. They've defeated their last enemy, the Parthians, and kind of all the pieces are in place.

Now, again, Rome went on to conquer Britain, and in the first century AD there were some additional conquests, but no longer with a sense we're in a life and death battle with the Carthaginians, for example.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: So, many of the old goals are gone, and so people have new goals. And Shakespeare's just indicating on the margins what's coming along the line. I mean because, by 330 AD, Constantine converts to Christianity and converts the whole Empire.

I mean, again, these things are really buried, but I'll just mention. Antony, at one point, refers to the "bulls of Basan." Out of nowhere, and – thank heavens for footnotes – that's a reference to the 22nd Psalm. And I know we all know the 23rd Psalm by heart.

KRISTOL: Right. Right.

CANTOR: But I bet you don't know the 22nd Psalm.

KRISTOL: You would win money with that bet. Right. Much to my embarrassment, but, yeah.

CANTOR: It begins with these words, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

KRISTOL: Oh, that's it. Yeah.

CANTOR: Which is better known –

KRISTOL: Yes.

CANTOR: From the Gospel According to Saint Matthew. And it is one of those examples where Jesus fulfills an Old Testament prophesy by quoting those lines. And how weird to have Mark Antony quote the 22nd Psalm as Jesus did.

And, you know, again, this is much debated, but again, I have a lot of people on my side on this. There is a scene, Antony's last supper before his battle with Octavius has a lot of overtones of The Last Supper. In fact, he is so downbeat that Cleopatra said, "What are you doing?" and his lieutenant Enobarbus says, "To make his followers weep." And he's always talking about his losing the next day, and "When I'm gone, don't forget me."

And so again, I'm not saying – as some people have argued – that Antony is somehow a portrait of Jesus, but he is a reminder of forces that were at work in the Rome of last decades BC, first decades AD, that, among other things, produced Christianity.

You know, Rome, the religion of Mithra, for example, was very powerful, especially to the Roman soldiers. They have found a mithraeum in London. There's a great one in Rome, if you go to Basilica of San Clemente. You go down to what's a first century apartment building and there's a mithraeum. Who knows, Rome could have gone over to Mithraism. There was a tremendous Egyptian cult in Rome. The goddess Isis is mentioned several times in *Antony and Cleopatra*. When Julius Cesar brought Cleopatra back in triumph to Rome, Cleomania swept the city. If you go to Pompeii, there's a temple of Isis there, right in the middle of downtown Pompeii next to the amphitheater. And wall paintings from it are in the Naples Archaeological Museum.

So something was happening, and again, it's the logic of a late Republic with its Empire. Coriolanus was never exposed to foreign deities. He never got to Egypt. He was lucky if he got to Antium, you know, 12 miles down the road.

But now, Roman tourism is big. In *Antony and Cleopatra* they're all talking about the pyramids and crocodiles, and the Romans were, in fact, fascinated with Egypt, and Shakespeare shows that and the Egyptianization of Rome. In what is essentially the headquarters of the Roman navy at Misenum, there's a party in the play and they dance the Egyptian Bacchanals. And that's doubly foreign. It's Bacchus; it's Greek, the Bacchanals. And it's Egyptian. And they say, "This ripens towards an Alexandrian feast." And, you know, by the way, this Roman play opens in Alexandria, obviously a city founded by Alexander the Great.

Shakespeare doesn't talk about this, but one of Octavius's charges against Antony was that he planned on moving the Empire to Alexandria. There's some evidence for that, and of course, ultimately, Constantine moved the capital to what's now Istanbul and which he then, modestly, named Constantinople after himself. But one of the effects of the Imperial expansion under the Republic was to shift the center of gravity of Rome eastward. Ephesus I think, which is on the west coast of Turkey, I think was the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire. A great deal of the commerce moved eastward. And again, that's why the Roman emperors eventually recognized that the center of the Empire was considerably east of Rome.

So Shakespeare shows that, that again, these consequences of expanding and expanding and, therefore, expanding the horizons of your people so they're no longer so clearly focused on Rome.

KRISTOL: It's a kind of cosmopolitanism and maybe more humanly interesting people as well, right?

CANTOR: Yes. I mean I think it's another one of these examples –

KRISTOL: I mean Antony and Cleopatra are very –

CANTOR: Yes. I mean, I usually end my discussion with my students, you know, "Which would you rather live in, the Rome of *Coriolanus* or the Rome of *Antony and Cleopatra*?" And it's 99 percent will of course say the land of *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is so much more similar to our globalized world.

Coriolanus, the world of Coriolanus is boring unless you're really into military victories. If you are, it's preferable. And I usually get them to understand at least why if you don't personally prefer it, you can recognize someone would.

KRISTOL: And also the civic spirit, which is impressive.

CANTOR: Yes. Yeah.

KRISTOL: We'd like to have some of that.

CANTOR: Yes. And that is why, you know, the classical republican tradition has been so important. It maintains the importance of civic virtue.

There's one critic who, you know, criticized my first book for seeming to prefer the Republic to the Empire by quoting Gibbon, the famous line that "Probably the best time to live in the world was the second century AD, under the good emperors." And, you know, my reaction to that is, that's a real academic's view of the world.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

CANTOR: It is, first of all, you're assuming you're not a slave. But also, you assume you'll live the good life among the elite.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: That's really what Gibbon had in mind, that it was a great time to be a scholar. But what if you think winning military victories is great? And what if you think participating actively in politics is great? And indeed, it's a purely material view.

I found, for the book, a really great quote from Bodin – Jean Bodin, the French political theorist, just about a generation before Shakespeare – where he talks about the fact that the Roman Empire may have been richer and materially better off, but there was no soul to it, and he posits the best time was in the third century, BC, under the Republic.

And it really is a question that was very important to earlier thinkers. [Rousseau](#), for example, in the [First Discourse](#) celebrates the spirit of the Roman Republic against modern cosmopolitanism. And that's why it's important to keep alive the classical republican tradition, which put its great emphasis on virtue, what it was to be – civic virtue, what it was to participate in the community and do things for the public good. Because what drops out in *Antony and Cleopatra* is any sense of the good of Rome anymore. It's almost a mafia-like world where people are just out to get what they can for themselves.

IV. Nietzsche and Shakespeare (1:13:30 – 1:36:48)

KRISTOL: Nietzsche features in this book quite a lot. Say a word about that.

CANTOR: Okay. This is again a bit of a historical accident that – I read too much as a kid. I was a child tragedy. So, as I was first studying these plays seriously in high school, I was also reading Nietzsche.

And what I did notice is that Nietzsche's theory of the difference between what he called *mass morality* and *slave morality* is very close to what Shakespeare presents in these plays, which isn't so surprising: Nietzsche was a great classical scholar and he was studying this material from the point of view of Homer. And Nietzsche's famous distinction between good and evil, and good and bad, which you find in [Beyond Good and Evil](#) and his book [The Genealogy of Morals](#), he sees the ancient ethics as being that of a warrior people where the fundamental virtue is strength.

And indeed, in *Coriolanus*, the big public speech on behalf of Coriolanus, one of the consuls says, "It is held that valor is the chiefest virtue." I always say to my students, "Could any politician say that in public in the United States?" What a firestorm that would set off. And I think Shakespeare was drawn to the subject matter of *Coriolanus* because he wanted to see, what is a community like when valor is the chiefest virtue?

And Nietzsche's idea is the masters, the aristocrats, the superior warriors define themselves in terms of a whole series of virtues – strength, health, honesty – and what they then see as bad is everything that's the opposite. So essentially, the value standard of strength versus weakness. And this is the standard of warrior culture. It's what you see in *The Iliad*, for example. It's what makes someone a hero: is he strong?

And Nietzsche's very controversial, but I think very insightful, theory is that Christian ethics results from an inversion of this: that the Christians take what the ancient pagans thought of as good and they make that evil, and they take what they thought of – the ancients thought of bad. and make that good, by which I mean this:

The greatest evil, the greatest sin for Christians, is pride and, in general, aggressiveness. And the definition of evil is the behavior of warriors. And what the warriors looked upon as a vice now is elevated

to a virtue – meekness, humility. As I like to put it, in the ancient world it was “the Greek shall inherit the earth.” For the Christians it was, “the meek shall inherit the earth.”

When you teach, you have to come up with slogans like this –

KRISTOL: That’s good. That’s good. Yeah.

CANTOR: – to make it stick. But and, Shakespeare shows that. He hadn’t read Nietzsche – though this is in Machiavelli.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: Machiavelli’s *Discourses* –

KRISTOL: And was Nietzsche – had Nietzsche read Shakespeare much?

CANTOR: He had, but –

KRISTOL: Well, Shakespeare was popular in Germany, right?

CANTOR: Yes. I mean this is amazing. Nietzsche studied *Julius Caesar* in high school.

KRISTOL: There you go.

CANTOR: Like every one of us, and we have his high school essay on *Julius Caesar*.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

CANTOR: Yes. You can read it. And it’s all about the friendship of Brutus and Cassius. It’s all about friendship.

There is no evidence that he read *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. He mentions 18 of the plays. We know that he read 18 of the plays and, you know, we have letters and conversations. He played the part of Hotspur in *Henry IV* at his high school. Can you imagine that?

KRISTOL: No.

CANTOR: Seeing Nietzsche playing the part of Hotspur? I mean – and according to his friend, he overacted.

KRISTOL: That I can imagine.

CANTOR: Yeah. Yeah. It was so strange to discover this in researching it. So, I don’t think Shakespeare understood the Roman – I don’t think Nietzsche understood the Roman plays. There were no signs. He was interested in them for other reasons. He really was interested in the theme of friendship in them. And so that, for example, the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius he discussed as if it was a quarrel between him and Richard Wagner. He really projected himself in the play.

He did know Shakespeare. His sister said, “It’s Shakespeare that drove him to the idea of The Superman.” That reading Byron and Schiller and Shakespeare broke him out of middle-class morality. His aunt Rosalie – Nietzsche had an Aunt Rosalie – gave him a set of Shakespeare for his sixteenth birthday.

KRISTOL: In German or in English?

CANTOR: I think it was in German because there were great Schlegel translations. I believe he read Shakespeare in German. And it produced Nietzsche.

KRISTOL: Yeah. That's amazing.

CANTOR: Yeah. It is very strange. I mean, his family was very upset with what happened from him from reading Nietzsche – from reading Shakespeare.

So I do, I feel that – well, it's interesting. Nietzsche bought into the Goethe idea that Shakespeare's Romans are Englishmen. He says that in *Untimely Meditations* and also in some of the notes he wrote. So I think that's where he went wrong. He didn't realize –

KRISTOL: He didn't take it seriously enough. Yeah.

CANTOR: Take it serious enough that this was a portrait of the ancient world.

But what I'm saying is I think Shakespeare, Nietzsche came together on this point, and so that, for example, at the very end of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Octavius says seeing Cleopatra's death, "Oh noble weakness." And that's Nietzsche in a nutshell.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CANTOR: How has weakness become noble? And there are many – well, even Antony's saying "The nobleness of life is to do thus." There are many moments in *Antony and Cleopatra* where the Romans are redefining nobility in what Nietzsche would call a Christian direction: that now weakness is going to become strength and so on.

And here's the interesting point that – this is what I do discuss in this long chapter on Nietzsche and Shakespeare. I think they have a disagreement. Nietzsche, at least in his last work, [*The Antichrist*](#), claims that Christianity destroyed an otherwise uncorrupted Roman Empire. And he goes on, the Roman Empire is going to last for a thousand years, it was built to last a thousand years, and then these Christians came along and ruined it.

Shakespeare shows something very different. It was the corruption of the Roman aristocracy that led to a lot of things, one of which was Christianity. That the change in people like Antony was necessary. And indeed, it's a real question in Nietzsche: if the Roman Empire was so strong, how did it get overthrown by these weak people?

And in fact, again, what I discovered in researching this essay, there are all sorts of notes. You know, Nietzsche left behind this Nachlass, as it's called, all these notes. And in those notes, he discusses the corruption of the Roman Empire. He hated Christianity so much that he wanted to claim there was nothing wrong with the Roman Empire. But his notes, for example, this one really key note where he says, "Once they saw Nero up on the throne, the idea that some men are by nature better than the others was shot." The claim to nobility was undermined by the corruption of the Roman Empire. And there's lots of notes to that effect.

So I think Shakespeare's correcting Nietzsche – possibly actually correcting Machiavelli, who leans towards this Nietzschean position. What Shakespeare shows, and I think in some ways it is the most remarkable contribution to the Roman plays, and why he is such an important analyst of Rome is that he sees the corruption of the nobility: The political corruption, the corruption by wealth, the sense of defeatism. *Antony and Cleopatra* is pervaded by defeatism. And actually, again, Shakespeare shows it already at the end of *Julius Caesar*. Brutus has lost everything, and largely through his own fault. And he says, "I shall" – this is as he's just about to commit suicide – he says, "I shall have more glory by this

losing day than Antony and Octavius will by winning by their” – what is it? – “vile victory,” I think he called – “vile conquest,” he says. That’s a real transformation in Roman spirit. Coriolanus and nobody in this play goes around saying I’m going to have more glory by losing.

KRISTOL: Right. Right.

CANTOR: And the notion that conquest is vile, that’s exactly this revaluation of Roman values that Nietzsche speaks about.

But Shakespeare shows it was happening in the Roman nobility as a result of the really corruption of the aristocracy. And many Roman historians, Ronald Syme, for example, in a great book on *The Roman Revolution*, on the transition from the Republic to the Empire, points out the dispiriting of the Roman nobility. And these were people who were used to having their lives in their control and having triumphs in their name and glory. And suddenly, they were courtiers.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Let me ask you maybe one last question. This is very speculative and sort of too simple and vague, but to what degree is – so Shakespeare’s trying to show you sort of the soul of the Roman world, the two different souls maybe, the republican and imperial one, the pagan – that’s very important, and he deals so subtly with Christianity in so many of the plays, *Hamlet* and stuff, you know, and its effect on politics.

How much of this is sort of a world that has gone away and somehow it’s useful for us to see as students of human nature? And how much does Shakespeare want to revive, somehow, the aspects of, let’s say, the ancient world?

CANTOR: No. I think – I mean, what was the Renaissance if not the revival of classical antiquity? That’s what we – that was Burckhardt’s thesis about it. I mean that’s the renaissance in Renaissance, the rebirth. And, you know, the great emblem of it is digging up these Roman statues. They hadn’t seen a naked statue in 1,500 years and the shock of, you know, there’s the – was it the – oh, the Barberini Faun, it’s in the Glyptothek in Munich.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CANTOR: It’s just an astonishing naked figure from the ancient world. Michelangelo was there in a minute when it was discovered, and may have retouched parts of it. And that’s where Michelangelo’s figures come from, is – if you’ve never seen the Barberini Faun, go to Munich. I mean, it’s breathtaking. I mean you can just watch, particularly women, walk into that room and just awestruck by this.

And, you know, this is something that – the naked human form had not been celebrated in the Middle Ages. Tullio Lombardo is famous for that Adam that’s in the Metropolitan Museum in New York – and which they accidentally let break and they just put it back together – but that’s the first great monumental nude in the Late Middle Ages, culminating in Michelangelo’s David.

I mean, those are emblematic of trying to revive an ancient view of the world that had been lost in the Christian Middle Ages. I like that because it’s a very good way of visualizing it.

But, you know, Machiavelli’s *Discourses* on the first ten books of Livy is an intent to revive – restate and revive the principles of ancient republicanism. And it was happening in Florence, Venice, for the first time since antiquity, the attempt to revive civic republics.

And I think Shakespeare was part of that larger movement, that his Roman plays are one of the great examples of the revival of classical antiquity. I think he’s had a huge long-term effect in bringing back these ideas, which were threatened to being lost and, you know, so much had to do with the conquest of Constantinople and all those Greek scholars fleeing west with *The Iliad*. *The Iliad* had been lost in the

Middle Ages, and it was just coming back in Shakespeare's lifetime. Chapman started translating *The Iliad* and Shakespeare was influenced by that.

So yes, I think he turned to this material with the view that this was an aspect of human nature that had been lost sight of, not totally. You're never going to lose sight of military virtue. There were the Crusades, after all.

But I think particularly in *Coriolanus* he said, "What's a pagan community like? What is it like to have a community based on the principle that valor is the chiefest virtue?" And the results are problematic. On the one hand, they're very impressive, and it certainly struck people in the Renaissance that Rome had conquered the entire Mediterranean world. And they couldn't equal Roman achievements for a long time.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: I mean, the point of the Duomo in Florence was finally to build a dome larger than the Pantheon. And it took them over a hundred years. You know, they built the church with a room for the dome, but they couldn't figure out how to build the dome. And again that's emblematic.

Florence is a great city for seeing the revival of pagan antiquity. In the old city hall, one floor is pagan and one floor is Christian. And the pagan floor is on top of the Christian floor, I might point out.

So yes, I think Shakespeare – let me put it sort of fancily that, in theoretical terms, he was interested in humanity and human possibilities. And he understood that all human possibilities are not possible at all times and everywhere. And to see a kind of hero of the proportions of Coriolanus, you had to go back to a pagan Rome where valor was held to be the chiefest virtue.

Where you go from there is complicated. Coriolanus is not a figure you'd immediately want to emulate.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: But I think Shakespeare was trying to show we need some of this, *so that* in *Henry V*, the Chorus, beginning of Act V, compares Henry's return to London to a Roman Caesar returning in triumph to Rome. Also, by the way, compares it to what they hoped would be the Earl of Essex' triumphal return from Ireland, having conquered the rebels there. Didn't quite work out that way. But that's a fascinating moment, the beginning of Act V of *Henry V*, when Shakespeare correlates Roman Caesars, Henry V, and the Earl of Essex. And it shows you that he did hope to weave together the Roman and the British into the contemporary world.

And I think his history plays, which are *filled* with classical references are an effort to show how we could recapture some of this military virtue, necessarily changed in a Christian context.

KRISTOL: And some civic republican virtue –

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: – by contrast perhaps with Crusades, which Henry V doesn't, right?

CANTOR: Yes. Henry V abandons the Crusader ideal of his father for something much more practical, which would be to conquer France.

And indeed, I think that the history plays are an attempt to modify the British monarchy on classical-republican models. And no less than Montesquieu said that.

KRISTOL: Wow.

CANTOR: You know, Montesquieu in *The Spirit of Laws* says, “There’s a great nation which appears to be a monarchy but is really a republic.” And he meant England, because he could see already that parliament –

KRISTOL: Was taking over. Yeah.

CANTOR: – was taking over and, you know, obviously had chosen the monarch in 1688. So I think Shakespeare’s part of a broader movement – which we call the Renaissance – to look back to classical antiquity and extract from it what was still valuable.

KRISTOL: Final question, I’m just curious. Is *Coriolanus* still your favorite of the three plays? Do you even have a favorite? They’re so –

CANTOR: You know, I –

KRISTOL: How can you pick a favorite among those, I suppose?

CANTOR: Yes. You know, by and large –

KRISTOL: It’s so much less well-known. Would you still say today that’s –

CANTOR: Yes. Well, so I’m a contrarian.

KRISTOL: That’s good. That’s good.

CANTOR: You know, and I think *King Lear* is Shakespeare’s greatest play and, therefore, the greatest achievement of the human race.

Hamlet, a close second.

But personal favorite, you know, all of this goes back to a little kid being transfixed by a voice on radio. It turns out it was Richard Burton, by the way.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

CANTOR: Yeah, playing *Coriolanus*. And I just was amazed at the rhetoric. And one shouldn’t reveal too much about one’s self, but I’m just attracted to the integrity and the honesty of Coriolanus. He has the worst opening lines of any character in Shakespeare. He says to the plebeians, “What’s the matter, you dissentious rogues, that rubbing the poor itch of your opinion make yourselves scabs?” Not the best way to ingratiate yourself. I confess, that most of my life I have to put up with people and you can’t say what you really think about them. And I think what really attracts me to Coriolanus is this guy, “What his brain thinks, his mouth speaks,” someone says. And, you know, the courage of that.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CANTOR: The unwillingness to back down. And of course, he’s got the old “on fair ground I could beat 40 of them.” So he can back up what he says. And he’s so outrageous. I generally am attracted to the opposite of what I am in literature. And it always frustrates me that now you’re supposed to like the literature of *your* people.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: I remember I was explaining to some students at the University of Virginia that I teach this course and I start with *The Iliad* and then I do *The Odyssey*. And they said, “Oh, are you Greek?” Yeah, I’m an ancient Greek.

And, you know, my whole point when I go to literature, it’s to find something *different*.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And Coriolanus is so *different*, and it’s the kind of person that in fact is rejected in our world. And so I’m a kind of contrarian. I’m attracted to it. So it’s a kind of personal favorite, partially because it is not very popular at all. But, in general, you know, again, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear* are very, very great plays.

But I really would like to put *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* in the same category. And I, you know, they really show a side of Shakespeare and his profundity, his ability – it’s an archaeological ability to re-create an ancient pagan community at a time when it was not well understood.

The Aeneid had obliterated *The Iliad* for the Middle Ages. And, you know, Aeneas is halfway Christian, Pious Aeneas, and Christianity made it’s peace. Dante could have Virgil accompany him in the afterlife.

So, you know, I really admire the ancient Greeks and Romans. I did before I came to Shakespeare, but in many ways he reinforced that. And studying, I feel I’ve learned so much about what makes the ancient world different by pursuing Shakespeare. And so I have this particular affection for Coriolanus because of his role in my life.

KRISTOL: Well, that’s great. Thank you for explaining this, getting to explain this to us. We’ll go to the books, your book, and go to Shakespeare.

CANTOR: Oh, above all go to Shakespeare.

KRISTOL: And go to both and learn more. It’s been terrifically interesting for me and stimulating. And Paul Cantor, thank you so much for joining me today.

CANTOR: Well, thank you for having me here. I’m a kind of evangelist for Shakespeare.

KRISTOL: That’s a good thing to be an evangelist for, I think.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]