

# CONVERSATIONS

WITH BILL KRISTOL

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

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

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### **I: Great Art and Public Approval (0:15 – 15:51)**

KRISTOL: Hi, I'm Bill Kristol. Welcome to CONVERSATIONS and welcome back to another conversation, with Paul Cantor, professor of English at the University of Virginia with whom I had the pleasure of discussing *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy*, I think is the name of your most recent excellent book. And now we go from high to low, from serious to frivolous, and discuss television. I said that just to provoke you now.

CANTOR: Yes, you do this every time.

KRISTOL: You can lecture me on how terribly –

CANTOR: Television has reached an important moment in the life of the medium. It's being canonized. It's undergoing canonization, thereby proving what I've been saying all along: that a lot of the criticism of television came from the fact that people were coming at it when it was an immature medium. And now, in really just a few decades, it's achieved the point where I think the most interesting narrative form of art now is television.

And a lot of people are coming to agree with me. And there are a lot of efforts now to determine which are the shows that are going to last, just the way it took a while to figure out which movies would last. And going all the way back to Shakespeare, although it was evident to people at the time how great he was, which of the plays by his contemporaries. So for example, a magazine I believe you're familiar with, the *Weekly Standard*.

KRISTOL: Right, right.

CANTOR: Had an article recently by Sonny Bunch called "Television Overload: so many great shows but who will remember them?" And it is interesting, a lot of people are reaching the point now where they say there's too much good stuff on television for anyone to follow it all. It used to be people would say, "There's nothing worth watching on television." And now, especially with these new streaming media, with Netflix and Hulu and Amazon, we're at a point where there's just too much good stuff to watch.

KRISTOL: And I just, I think we discussed this, on one previous *Conversation*, so we don't have to draw on this, but just for the record, I mean, what would be two or three or four of the obvious candidates to enter the canon? And then we could talk about how canons get made and so forth.

CANTOR: Okay, I mean for me I think the greatest show of all time is Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad*. And a lot of people agree with that. I was thinking about this, if I had to choose the five best shows of all time and in no order it would be *Breaking Bad*, *Deadwood*, *The Simpsons*, *Seinfeld*, and *The X-Files*. And a lot of people would agree with that, at least when you look at people's list of top 20 shows all five of those tend to appear in every one.

Other shows that other people offer as the best show of all time would be say *The Sopranos* or *The Wire*. I'm just not as familiar with them as I should be and it's hard for me to comment on them. But there's quite a consensus growing, especially as to which are, say, the top 20 shows of all time.

KRISTOL: And will they – So I guess the question then is somewhat, you've escaped the prejudices of our age group, but I still have them, so some of my prejudice is, "Well that's very nice. They're the best shows but they're not going to last really are they?" I mean the way Shakespeare and novels and Dickens last. Are they, is there going to be a canon of television that people will look back on and watch?

CANTOR: That's exactly my point. And let's leave, I mean Shakespeare is an exception.

KRISTOL: Yeah, let's just leave him aside.

CANTOR: And let me just say that Shakespeare is more or less universally acknowledged to be the greatest author of all time; and moreover he's stayed alive so that his plays are produced all over the world continually. And, but there's very few other people like that. For example, among novelists, you know Jane Austen and Charles Dickens would be regarded almost universally as great geniuses of the novel form. And their works have stayed alive so people are still reading their novels.

But let's take Dante or Milton. I mean Dante is clearly on everybody's list for the great canonical authors. The *Divine Comedy*, which is an all-time great work, is not however read by anyone who's not in academics with perhaps exceptions in Italy although I wonder how many average Italians read *The Divine Comedy*. Or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which is again one of the all-time greatest works of literature ever and is on anybody's short list of the literary canon. I don't think people, ordinary people read it. Now again, see that's why there are few authors like Shakespeare and Dickens and James Austen who are still alive in that sense.

So I believe ,let's say that *Breaking Bad* will be remembered a thousand years from now. And it will probably still be viewed. In fact, I think a lot of these TV works are more accessible to ordinary people and more likely to stay alive in that sense.

I mean, the point is that any time a new medium comes along people think it's ephemeral. They think it won't last. And for example, the early movies, most of them have been destroyed by now because of the problem with the film stock. But some of the early movies like *Birth of a Nation* or its equivalent Italian epic *Cabiria*, they've survived and are still watched; and I think it will be the same with television.

When television came along it seemed like an ephemeral medium. Just the shows themselves weren't being preserved. CBS erased all the Johnny Carson shows that it had recorded in New York, erased them because of some idiot in their so-called preservation unit – But a lot of shows have survived in many cases in the form of kinescopes, which are just movies taken of the television broadcast and so they're of inferior quality.

Now for example, *I Love Lucy* appears on almost everybody's list of let's say the 20 greatest shows of all time. Part of that, it was the first sitcom to be filmed. So it exists on high quality film stock in color and that's, I frankly think it's being overrated for that reason. But we now have a situation where TV shows are being preserved in the form of DVDs and other digital forms. They are going to last.

When you go back to Greek tragedy we only have 33 of them. They were written on papyrus, a lot of them were initially lost. Fortunately 33 of them survived and by the Middle Ages they were being written on vellum, so beautiful manuscripts that still exist and they went into print almost immediately in the late 15th century when print became available.

So you know with some of these things the issue is just whether it will physically survive. And now we have reason to believe that television will physically survive, and we are talking about works of you know for example, *Breaking Bad* in artistic quality is as good as Dickens. It's not as good as Shakespeare but nothing's as good as Shakespeare.

But I think the best of these television shows – And by the way, what's impressive about them is they are long form narratives. *Breaking Bad* is 62 episodes, a lot of these series, *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, they are 50, 60, 70 episodes and they tell a story over that length of time. In that sense their greatest analog is the Victorian serialized novel.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: Which would appear over a year, year and a half, in installments. And looking back those novels from the Victorian period are amazing because of the number of characters in them, the depth of the characterization, the complexity of the plots. In that sense they exceed any play that's ever been written.

And that's now been reproduced in this amazing, long-form television, these so-called arcs where stories last a whole season, sometimes five seasons, as in the case of *Breaking Bad*. And that allows these TV creators to do things that are frankly not possible in any other medium and are going to give them lasting value.

KRISTOL: And I suppose what it means to become a canon, or be canonized, is not that everyone reads it, and not even that most, or many people do. But it's available. I mean it's in a list somewhere so that if you're a bright student, or if you're literarily ambitious, or if you're part of a book club that wants to rediscover good works, it's sort of there to be discovered.

CANTOR: Yeah, and academics are playing a role in it. In a way I feel bad saying that because it sounds self-serving. I will say academics are always the last to know. I mean academics were denigrating movies, they were denigrating television. The public discovers what's great first and eventually even academics have to be dragged screaming into recognizing the value here.

And you know, again, I'm working on an essay on *Breaking Bad* right now; and I own seven academic books about *Breaking Bad*, and that series went off only, you know, five years ago.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And it's one of the things that ultimately qualifies a work for the canon is that you can view it again and again and still get something out of it. If people wanted from me the test--how you figure out what's the touchstone for figuring out what's in the canon--it's that you can go back and watch the show and not be bored. You know the ultimate test of this is in movies with *The Godfather 1* and *2*. I mean I got to be very careful. If it's on, if I'm switching channels and if it's on, if I don't get to another channel within 30 seconds, I'm hooked. I have to see it to the end. It's that good. And *Breaking Bad* I've seen all the way through three times now. I certainly anticipate another two times in my lifetime.

And that's always a sign of something that is timeless: that you can't just see it once and get everything out of it. And the degree of academic analysis that you get on these shows is one indication of how much there is to find in them. I find it, I thought I knew everything about *Breaking Bad* –

KRISTOL: As did we of course.

CANTOR: And then I read seven books on it and found new stuff in there.

KRISTOL: And I suppose it's common that in these, the different literary forms that the public discovered, they originally are produced for the public; and then, as you said, the academics get there late. The canonization happens later on. I mean with modern literature, and sort of high culture art, it seems to be they try to create it directly for the canon, so to speak, instead of for the public.

CANTOR: Yes. I mean a classic example of that would be T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. He wrote that thing with footnotes supplied by himself. He had professors in mind. I think Joyce's *Ulysses* is similar: that they were in a way shooting for the academic audience first; and they succeeded. But that's, it's really not until the 19th century, Romanticism, and above all, the high modernism of the 20th century, that you get elitist works that are written for an elite.

And those modernists had great publicists, and they created the myth that a great work of art, and above all an original, revolutionary, work of art has to be hated by a mass audience. And that is simply not true in the history of art. Most of the great works of art from the ancient world, from Shakespeare's day, in the 18th century, they were appreciated in their time. Even in the 19th century, Victorian novels and Italian opera are great examples of works that we now have in the canon and yet were, just drove audiences wild at the time and they were really popular.

KRISTOL: I've always thought that modernist thing, I mean I'm sure there are instances of it happening, that you know are booed the first time you see an impressionist or music. People like Stravinsky. But it always struck me as a kind of conceit and overstated.

CANTOR: Yeah. Now for example, Impressionism was not a compliment. It was a way of putting down that art. Critics were saying, "Hey you didn't do a painting. You did an impression of a painting."

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And the name stuck and is now a badge of honor.

But so, yes, it's starting around then that you get artists who are deliberately provocative. The Stravinsky story, the 1916 debut of *Rite of Spring*. You know when you go back to that, a lot of the puzzlement in the audience was the result of Nijinsky's choreography and the costumes, which have been preserved; and they're very strange costumes. And so the whole premiere may have been a disaster for a number of reasons, among which was the orchestra, even though Pierre Monteux was conducting, the orchestra couldn't play the music yet.

And, but within a few years it was in *Fantasia* by Disney: *A Rite of Spring*. Leopold Stokowski who mastered the piece was conducting it properly, Philadelphia Orchestra performing it well. And so, I mean that's late '30s, from 1916.

So again we've been sold a bill of goods that great works are despised by large audiences, and from which people drew the conclusion, if works are despised by audiences then they are great works.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: That's the real mistake. But in the history of art, over all the centuries, most of the works we think of as great were well-received in their time.

## II: The Canon, from Greek Tragedy to TV (15:51 – 45:38)

KRISTOL: And how does the canon get made? Back to Greece or Shakespeare.

CANTOR: Yeah, you know, I find it interesting, the example of Greek tragedy. Because this is something that's canonical. It's one of the cores of the canon, the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. And as I thought over the process there, I began to see that there's a pattern there that's repeated over history.

So that for example, it's a little complicated, but I'll say that tragedy began as a low form. And a kind of popular form. And that sounds preposterous today because tragedy has become the sublime word. You know what "tragedy" means in Greek? It means "goat song." That's all it means, is goat song. And that's a real puzzle scholars don't quite understand. Was it that in these competitions to be the best playwright, you won a goat? Maybe they were sacrificing a goat at the festival of Dionysus. Maybe the satyrs were dressed up as half man, half goat. It's actually a puzzle why it's called goat song. But it was called goat song, which gives you some indication that it wasn't the highest thing in the world. And indeed –

KRISTOL: That it was done for public.

CANTOR: Oh absolutely. Now it was done in the era we know, in 5th century B.C. Athens, as part of a religious festival. The festival of the Dionysia. And so, in effect, the whole city turned out for it.

Now we don't know much about the origins of tragedy, but Aristotle does discuss it in Chapter 4 of his *Poetics*. And as far as we can tell, this form begins in the middle of the 6th century B.C. in Athens under this great tyrant Peisistratus.

One of the great things he did for Athens was institute tragedy. And as far as we can tell, originally there was one actor and the chorus. We know that because Aristotle says that Aeschylus introduced the second actor, that's in the 5th century. And what was original was a new mode of narration. And that's what struck people. Up to then, the main thing was hearing Homer recited. They had these people called rhapsodes who could recite Homer, and memorized it in huge chunks, and that was a big, big public event.

Plato describes this in his dialogue the *Ion*, and moreover in Plato's *Republic*, when Socrates is talking about poetry with his interlocutors. Socrates works very hard to explain the difference between epic and tragedy. That one is just narrated and the other is acted out, which seems to indicate to me, that was a very novel notion.

And the way I like to picture it is a couple of guys are in a Greek taverna and they're drinking pretty heavily and they're trying to, "Well what are we're going to do tonight?" And one guy says, "I got tickets to this recitation of Homer. I mean it's, this rhapsode from Corinth in town and it's going to be great." And the other guy says, "Ah, another recitation of Homer. I've been to a goat song and it's this new thing the goat song and you can't believe it. There's like 12, 14 people up there. They're singing, they're dancing. I don't know what the story is exactly about, but it's just so cool. Let's go to a goat song."

And I think that's true of art: that people are impressed with media, and especially with new media.

So when film came along around 1900, you didn't have to give them *Gone with the Wind* or *Citizen Kane*. A train pulling into a station in Paris was already a big thing, and people went to see that. And similarly with television when it came out people were just impressed that they could see this stuff move in their home. And I remember, I remember early TV, you'd sit there and watch a Charles Antel [ph.] lanolin hair lotion commercial for 15 minutes because it was on television. And I think "goat song" was like that originally.

And so media come along, they are invented for other than artistic reasons. Often in our day by inventors. And people are just impressed. They want to see the new medium. Then somebody comes along and elevates the game, uses the new medium for something bigger. Again Aristotle is very cryptic and elliptical about this. He talks in one sense about how people gave up epic for tragedy because the forms were in more esteem. And it sounds just like that. That "I was so sad, we used to go to Homer's epics. But now people are rushing to 'goat song' because it's just, it's cool, the form."

KRISTOL: It's like people talking about – like as theater was – As the movies came along, the old fans of theater are very unhappy that people are going to these cheaper entertainments.

CANTOR: Absolutely. And indeed the early movies were terrible. And it's the hardest thing to say, presumably early goat song was terrible and then essentially Aeschylus was the guy, as far as we can tell, who had the idea, "I'm going to use goat song, only to dramatize stories for Homer." And then we had something, we had the big subjects again.

And we've got them with this new popular, powerful new medium. And I think that's typical and interesting that in the history of media – again the media don't start off because someone's got an artistic vision of what can be done with it. They start off with somebody like Edison invents motion pictures, and then doesn't know what to do with it, and fortunately very early to get people like the Lumière brothers and then Méliès, And then D.W. Griffith. And suddenly you've got someone who's got an epic vision now of cinema.

And it's the same with television. I mean there weren't many geniuses at work in early television but there was Ernie Kovacs who came along in the '50s and understood what was unique about the medium, and exploited things like videotape. And so that's what seems to happen with Greek tragedy: that the medium got popular, and suddenly it attracts these geniuses. And indeed, you get this sequence: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides.

When I think about it, I'm talking about the evolution of media here, I like to invoke evolutionary theory. This is what's called punctuated equilibrium, in the revision of Darwin that people like Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge brought about. Darwin's vision of evolution was gradualist. In fact, you know we're not supposed to say there's anything wrong in *Origin of Species* but any biologist knows it. And one thing Darwin insists on is that evolution is purely gradualist. And he says something like, "If you can show me mass extinctions then my theory is incorrect." And, of course, we now know about mass extinctions and things like the Cambrian Explosion where suddenly around 500 million years ago all sorts of new life forms appeared. And again that's what Gould and Eldredge called punctuated equilibrium.

And there's something similar in art. It's not gradualist. This new medium comes along, for a little while nothing happens with it. And then there's this artistic explosion. The aesthetic equivalent of the Cambrian Explosion. It happened with the novel in the 18th century in Britain.

I like to point out, the novel didn't grow out of ever increasing short stories. It's not like there was a 10 page story, then there was a twenty-page story then, and eventually we – No. This novel form comes along. You get suddenly Henry Fielding, Daniel Defoe, and Samuel Richardson, three geniuses all experimenting with different forms of the novel. They go to one thousand, two thousand pages.

KRISTOL: Is there a technological breakthrough that allows it?

CANTOR: Yes. Well in this case, yes. And it's interesting you bring that up, because printing got cheaper in the 18th century.

And then the thing that happened in the 19th century was the combination of Charles Dickens, rag paper, and steam presses. Dickens was the first to sell 100,000 copies of a novel. And that changed everything. When people saw you could sell 100,000 copies and the only reason that was possible is they didn't

base the paper on wood, they could base it on rags. The industrial revolution in Manchester was producing more rags than they'd ever seen before because of the leftovers of the textile industry. So paper plummeted in price. And then steam engine printing presses could produce a quantitative increase in the number of –

So, yes, and again it's this weird symbiosis that Dickens comes along when the steam press and rag paper come along. And there would not have been a demand for the rag paper and the steam presses if Dickens wasn't selling so many novels. On the other hand, Dickens wouldn't have been able to make that kind of money – and he became the equivalent of a multimillionaire – if this technology hadn't been there.

And again, Thomas Edison may not have had an aesthetic bone in his body. He was an inventor. And in fact, it's very interesting, you know if it had been up to Thomas Edison, the movie industry would never have developed. He squatted on his patents, he formed a cartel which was eventually broken by the courts. He, you know I give him credit, his studio came up with the *Great Train Robbery*, credited with being the first Western, and you know full length film. I think it's 15 minutes long. But he thought of film as an industrial product. He had this studio, it was churning out one 15-minute movie after another. And he thought that's all you needed. And for that matter Dickens [Edison] thought the way to show movies was on a nickelodeon. You know that little machine where you looked into it.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: It was the Lumière brothers in France who first thought of, "We're going to project this on a screen." And then hundreds of people –

KRISTOL: When you said Dickens you meant –

CANTOR: Edison, yes.

KRISTOL: So it was in France that they first realized, yeah you don't need to –

CANTOR: That you can project the film.

KRISTOL: – look through a little thing.

CANTOR: Yes, and someday thousands of people might see a movie. And it is yeah, again, if it had been up to Edison, there would have been no D.W. Griffith. And fortunately his patents couldn't hold in Europe and they couldn't hold in California, which is, that's why the movie industry moved to California.

KRISTOL: Is that right?

CANTOR: Yeah well sunshine and yeah, but really to escape the Edison Trust.

KRISTOL: Wow.

CANTOR: Because California judges wouldn't enforce his patents. It is weird to understand how there's this interplay between law, technology, and artistic development. But it is.

So the people who create the medium have no idea what to do with it. But it is interesting, artists quickly adapt and so that's what happened in fifth century Athens.

KRISTOL: So they adapt, they produce these higher level –

CANTOR: Yes, they realize –

KRISTOL: – forms of the same.

CANTOR: At the beginning of a medium it can coast on the sheer novelty of the medium. It doesn't take an artist. Again those early films, you see people are just impressed that it's a moving picture. And again with early television, people would literally watch anything.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: Including commercials. Again, my family got a television in 1949 so I virtually was watching from the beginning.

KRISTOL: Right, right.

CANTOR: So anyway, the medium eventually attracts people who know what to do with it. Both in the sense of elevating the game but also what's distinct about the medium and how to exploit it. Now that's when elites start to notice it, when the medium becomes powerful and it's producing stuff that really has an impact.

So Plato comes along and starts to criticize tragedy. Now Plato was a very smart guy, and I admire him greatly, and I will have the courage to attack him only because Aristotle did and I'm going to side with Aristotle here again. It's very interesting to see Plato's reaction to tragedy which he thinks of as “goat song.” This is in *The Republic* in Books 3 and 10 where Socrates is talking about the education of the guardians in this best city they're creating.

And Socrates decides, “We gotta get the tragedians out.” Also Homer out. And it's very interesting to see that Plato makes the charges against goat song that everybody makes against every new medium. First thing is, people mistake it for reality. They see a representation and they think it's just the reality. And it's got too much sex and violence in it.

This was said about the 19th century novel. It was said about movies. It's said about television. Now said about videogames. I mean any new medium comes along and people enjoy it. It's that old Puritan spirit. God forbid that there should be anything that people are enjoying, anywhere.

And what's particularly interesting, and again I think typical in Plato's response, is he does not discuss Euripides, Aeschylus, or Sophocles. It's like there's just this thing, tragedy. And it's undifferentiated. There are not good and bad tragedians, there's just tragedy. And this is the way people talked about television for decades. “Oh, television.” And they couldn't name a single television show.

KRISTOL: The vast wasteland, or whatever.

CANTOR: Yeah, the vast wasteland idea. Or I was – the Frankfurt School thinkers, Horkheimer and Adorno write about television in the culture industry chapter of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* book. And I'm reading the stuff, they mentioned Donald Duck, but I'm reading this thing and I realize, “Hey, this is *Our Miss Brooks*. They're talking about *Our Miss Brooks*. Not that they knew the name or anything. They just said –

And Plato only names Homer. And I don't even know if he quotes tragedy. Maybe he quotes Euripides at one point. But clearly, it's this undifferentiated medium. And he's right that it's driving Athens wild. I mean these stagings were overwhelming. The way I like to point out to my students is they were operatic. I mean this is, in fact, where opera comes from, 16th century Florentine attempts to reproduce the effect of Greek tragedy. But you know the accounts of performances, people were fainting.

KRISTOL: Right.



CANTOR: At the performance of the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus women were said to have gone into labor and had miscarriages. This is the kind of thing that comic books were blamed for in the 1950s.

And so to Plato it's this undifferentiated medium. And here's where Aristotle comes along, one generation later, and that's the beginning of canonization. Because he's talking still about goat song, about this Greek medium, but he knows there are different playwrights, and he's trying to tell you what's a good goat song and a bad goat song, and that Sophocles is the best and *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the best of the best. And you can start to see canonization happening in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Where he's singling out who the best playwrights are, and what their best plays are and why.

And it is interesting, again, that this is fairly close to the origins of Greek tragedy. And Aristotle gets it right. Now in a way this is circular. He discusses the Greek tragedians we have: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. And it's estimated there are about a thousand tragedies written in the fifth century in Athens and we have 33. That's very sad in a way.

But it's not so sad because we don't have any indications, "Well you know Sophocles and Aeschylus and Euripides were pretty good. But Agathon, he was the greatest writer of tragedy." In fact, Plato portrays Agathon in his dialogue, *The Symposium*, and Agathon comes across as an idiot, and in fact distinctly inferior to Aristophanes, the great comic poet.

So we lost some great stuff: of Aeschylus' Prometheus trilogy, we only have *Prometheus Bound*. We don't have the other two plays. I mean we have accounts of them. We have some quotation lines from them. But so we did lose some good stuff. But it looks like what happened was the playwrights who were the best were preserved. And among them, their plays, their best plays were preserved.

Now again it's partially accidental. It's an amazing fact that any of them exist, since as I said, they were originally written on papyrus. The texts we have probably traced back to the second century B.C. in Alexandria. That's where they probably were written down in the form that the Byzantine Empire inherited. I mean the earliest manuscripts are from 1000 A.D.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: I mean that'll give you an idea, these plays are from 500 B.C., 450 B.C., and the earliest manuscripts we have are from 1000 A.D. But evidently, you know, people preserved them. And Aristotle was probably one of the keys. So the key, "Okay, these are the guys we've got to preserve."

KRISTOL: We've got to copy these ones.

CANTOR: Yeah. And the ones that are in more demand, there are more copies and more likely to exist. It's just amazing. I was in Florence at the Laurentian library and they had an exhibit of the Byzantine texts they had. Because when Byzantium fell, Constantinople fell in 1453, the Greek scholars went to Florence with their texts. And I mean, I actually wept when I saw an 11th century Homer and 11th century Euripides.

And this, and this will be a thousand years from now someone is going to see a DVD set, maybe Blu-ray set of *Breaking Bad* and they're going to weep that this was how it got preserved to the point where now in 3000 they can just inject it into your head, and you've got the whole series in your brain.

But that pattern gets repeated with each medium. That at first people are attracted to it for the sheer novelty of the medium. Then the great artists start flocking to the medium because it's so rewarding. The last people to figure it out are intellectuals who always defend the old medium and see what's wrong with the new medium. And then people start to come along and say, "Hey wait a minute. There's, there's good stuff being written in this."

So for example, Shakespeare. 1598 someone was canonizing – I brought this along because it's such a remarkable passage. This is from a man named Francis Meres and it's called *Palladis Tamia*.

KRISTOL: Mears is M-E-I?

CANTOR: M-E-R-E-S. And he's systematically comparing the ancient authors with the, for him the modern authors. And so he writes, "As the soul of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras, so the sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honeyed-tongued Shakespeare. Witness his "Venus and Adonis," his "Lucrece," his sugared sonnets among his private friends." The poet Ovid has been re-incarnated in Shakespeare.

And then "As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage. For comedy, witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Love's Labor's Lost*, his *Love's Labor's Won*, his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and his *Merchant of Venice*. For tragedy, his *Richard the Second*, *Richard the Third*, *Henry the Fourth*, *King John*, *Titus Andronicus*, and his *Romeo and Juliet*.

KRISTOL: And this is before he's written *Lear* and *Hamlet*.

CANTOR: This is very interesting. We have a date, Shakespeare's plays are hard to date, but one of the best pieces of evidence is every play that Meres mentions we know was written before 1598. By the way we're very puzzled as scholars with a play called *Love's Labors Won*.

KRISTOL: Do we think one is lost? Do we think it's just a lost manuscript?

CANTOR: Yeah, it may have been a different name for one of the comedies. Or it may be a lost play. We know *Cardenio* was lost. We know in that case that Shakespeare wrote a play called *Cardenio* and it has been lost.

But it's a fascinating passage. And by the way, he goes through his contemporaries and pretty much he names the people we still read: Edmund Spenser, Christopher Marlowe, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton. Well, scholars like me read.

And so it does show, I mean, this is quite remarkable: 1598. It's coincidentally, it's the first time Shakespeare's name starts to appear on the title page of printed versions of his plays, as if he's become a brand. Booksellers they used to sell it by who the actor was. They'd publish a Marlowe play and say "as acted by Edward Alleyn," the way you promote a movie now by the star. Very seldom do you promote a movie by the screenwriter.

But anyway, so there's another act of canonization here and it's starting in Shakespeare's lifetime. So Ben Jonson who is undoubtedly very envious of Shakespeare, nevertheless said his plays were "for all time."

And you can see it happening with the novel. You know we have such a skewed perception of these things. It's very hard to convince my students that Dickens novels were not taught at Oxford University in 1860. In fact, Shakespeare was not taught. They were still teaching Latin and Greek authors. We see this from the other end of the canonization process.

It's very hard for people to understand that there was a time when people voluntarily read novels. Now I have to assign them and give quizzes. And similarly with movies, we were talking about this. The first serious book on movies in America came out in 1915, which is just staggeringly early.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CANTOR: We were talking about it earlier, and you guessed 1930. I would have guessed maybe 1925 but Vachel Lindsay, the poet, the author of "Congo," which used to be taught in New York City high schools, wrote a book called *The Art of the Moving Picture*.

And it's a serious attempt to assess this new art form, and he starts assembling the canon, and he picks this Italian film *Cabiria*. He picks Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Again whenever I mention *Birth Of A Nation* I do have to say it's an awful racist picture. But as a work of cinematic art, it was unparalleled and changed the whole history of cinema. And it's to this day a remarkable film to watch in terms of the technical use of the camera and so on.

And Lindsay is talking about what he thinks the great films are. Half of them are lost. We just have titles. But some of them have survived. He did another edition in 1922 and he says, "I've just seen this thing called *Cabinet of Dr. Cagliari*. It's amazing." And he talks about, he'll talk about the Christopher Marlowe of movies or the Byron of movies, and there's a lot of silly things in the book. For example he was one of the people who said, "Movies: silent. That's it. It's the art of the moving picture. Sound, they'll never be able to do it. But even if they could, it would be awful."

It's really fascinating to go through in the 20s to see the critics who, you know, initially would have rejected cinema, now rejecting sound movies. And this one, there's one critic, I unfortunately don't remember his name but he's saying, "You know, yeah, these sound movies, they're awful. But I just saw this thing by some guy named Alfred Hitchcock." This is like 1929. He says, "You know, it was a good movie I have to tell you." And you really – it's great moments like that. That guy should get an award.

KRISTOL: Right, right.

CANTOR: And there's always a struggle with critics where they fault the new medium. You know television was viewed as bad movies at first. And of course the reason for that is by the time the new medium comes along the old medium has been perfected. People have really figured out how to use it and the new medium is still struggling to get on its feet.

So indeed the movement from silent movies to sound movies was a huge step backwards in cinematic art because they had to use soundstages, the camera movement ceased to be fluid. I mean when you see the things that Murnau, F.W. Murnau, was able to do with the camera in the silent era, you know silent movies had reached their peak.

And you know, Abel Gance's *Napoléon* came out against Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*. And *The Jazz Singer* blew Abel Gance away. And here's one of the last great silent films, this classic that we now revive. And yet it couldn't hold a candle to what is a very weak film. But Jolson sings. And so that's typical.

And so yeah, by the time television came along movies were – you know 1939 that incredible year, all these great movies came out, and television was a very weak medium in its early stages.

I might add that poor television had the great misfortune to be in its infancy as a medium when the Frankfurt School of criticism was at a peak. And so it was vicious attacks on television from Horkheimer and Adorno, who were living in Los Angeles, having fled Germany, and looking at television, and in 1950 television looked terrible. And they were saying you know, "This medium is never going anywhere because you can't tell a story in 15 minutes." They didn't foresee that 50 years later Vince Gilligan would tell a story in sixty-two hours.

### **III: Improvisation and Great Art (45:38 – 1:26:14)**

KRISTOL: What was the breakthrough, when it went from half an hour or an hour to the kind of evolved form?

CANTOR: Well you know –

KRISTOL: Was that itself – that wasn't a technological matter. But it was a commercial matter, in a way, right?

CANTOR: No, yes, and you know it's, that you start to get things like *Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue* who start having the arc. That is the episodes are still somewhat self-contained, but every storyline isn't resolved. And then *The X-Files* was key in this development – which means the 90s – in having not only self-contained episodes, but what were called the mythology episodes which did develop this huge arc about the alien invasion and the government conspiracy to cover it up.

KRISTOL: Because it seems in our youth, you're a little older than I am, but so it was like a rule of TV –

CANTOR: Oh absolutely.

KRISTOL: – everything had to be contained –

CANTOR: Yes and then –

KRISTOL: And you've got the characters of course would come back.

CANTOR: Yes, but the characters wouldn't fundamentally change.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: So you had, you know, the famous thing in *Leave It to Beaver*. Beaver and Wally would just get older and older; and by the time Beaver's walking with a cane it's hard to see him still in grade school. That's why *The Simpsons* can go on forever because they made the decision to keep the characters the same age, and they can keep just drawing them that way.

But yeah, now a lot of this has to do with first, the breaking of the hegemony of the three big networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS. And I believe you know something about the man who brought that about, a man named Rupert Murdoch.

KRISTOL: Is it true that he really did?

CANTOR: Yes, yes. His creation of the Fox Network was an amazing job, which by the way it depended upon his reading the law and creating a network that was not a network.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: His genius was seeing, "I won't meet the FCC's definition of network. I won't show television every night, and I won't show more than 15 hours." Because he did that he could own more TV stations and he was able to overcome the advantage of the big three networks. So again it's one of these things, partially technology. And then cable TV. Another technology issue.

And for that matter, so much depended on the sponsored nature of television. The fact that going back to radio in the 20s the government decided radio should be free.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And that sounds so wonderful, but in fact if radio had been allowed to develop on its own we might have had subscription radio – the equivalent of HBO – might have had subscription television from

the beginning. It was technologically feasible. There's a good book about this called *The Political Spectrum*, I have forgotten the author, but a lot of government rulings determined the development of TV in ways that had a negative impact on the artistic quality of things.

We could have had the equivalent of HBO decades before if television had been allowed to evolve on its own. But once you made the decision that the airwaves were going to deliver stuff free, they had to be sponsored. And people have pointed out that sponsorship is what kept the quality low because you needed to appeal to the largest possible audience for broadcasting.

What's called "narrow casting," which again it starts with Fox and then HBO and Showtime, that made it possible to appeal to an elite among the audience. So it is really, you know –

KRISTOL: And did most of these shows start – I mean that's my sense, is that this would be true of TV, maybe of novels – they start off appealing to, I don't know, to a relatively small number. And then they expand quickly.

CANTOR: Yes, yeah. Now it's interesting in the case of *Breaking Bad*. It was delivering, I think, between a million and 2 million viewers a week. And then when it went on, I don't know if it is Hulu or Netflix, everything changed, and eventually was in the last season, ten million viewers.

And there too, the streaming services made binge watching possible. It's hard to explain to my students what watching television was in the 1950s. You saw the show and that was it, you might never see it again. Maybe once in the summer reruns.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: Maybe it would go into syndication. I, when I was researching some of my writings on Westerns, I was reading a very good book on the Western, but you go – it is written in the '70s – you go to the back and see what this poor guy had to do, going around to archives in 14 different states just to see the episode of *Gunsmoke* he wanted to see.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And now, you know, you just –

So, and here's the thing, that the critics underestimate the technological potential of any medium because they're not great inventors. And they're also not great artists.

Now Marshall McLuhan, I was very pleased to see my students have not heard his name. I usually don't like it but this is a case where I'm okay with it. That, I mean this was the great guru of the media and made it into *Annie Hall*. I did meet him once, he was a nice guy. But I was just looking over his *Understanding Media* and he defines television as a low-definition medium. Defines it as that. That's how he distinguishes it from movies. Movies are high-definition; television is low-definition. Now what would he do with high-definition TV? And again when he watched films, television in the 1960s, it was low definition. But, you know, he builds that into his definition of the medium, not realizing technology is going to get better.

Or for example, it's so laughable now, he defines television as a "cool medium." Television cools passions down, especially in news programs. It cools the passions down. Now he was thinking of the style of Walter Cronkite and Huntley and Brinkley and what television news was like the 1960s. I don't believe –

KRISTOL: By contrast with presumably radio, before which had all these demagogues.

CANTOR: Yes, exactly, exactly. Not realizing that television would get its demagogues too. But this is what I see – And this is why it's important to study the history of these media because so many people are just locked into one phase of the medium.

And again what I – very often people ask me, “Well what do you think the next great thing on television will be?” And I tell them, if I knew I would not be a professor of English. I would go into TV and make, you know, maybe a thousand dollars more that way. But we're not very good at predicting the future. We're pretty good at predicting the past. And so that's what I do.

You know the one thing we can do is now look at what's happened, and in retrospect say what's now the canon of television. But we've got to be careful about thinking that what we're seeing now is the way television will always be, because again we're not technological geniuses as professors, and we're certainly not creative geniuses. And you know I always say, “You want to know what the next big thing is on television? Find some eight-year-old and ask him, because he's going to do it, or she is going to do it. It's not going to be me.”

And so you know, again, I think we're at the point now where we're coalescing around a canon. Again, I've brought along two of the books here, this one *TV (The Book)* by Sepinwall and Seitz. They pick the hundred greatest TV shows. And then David Bianculli has this book *The Platinum Age of Television: From I Love Lucy to the Walking Dead*.

And, you know, they have different criteria, but their lists overlap a great deal. And you know you go back to the '50s everybody is saying *Lucy* and *Gunsmoke* and lot of people say *Perry Mason*, they're forgetting *Have Gun, Will Travel* and *The Sergeant Bilko Show* –

KRISTOL: *Sergeant Bilko* was excellent.

CANTOR: Oh and you go back to that –

KRISTOL: Extremely talented cast.

CANTOR: Oh man, the “Private Harry Speakup” episode, they're the funniest half hour of television ever. That's when they accidentally inducted a chimpanzee into the army, but anyway.

KRISTOL: Forgot that one.

CANTOR: But there's a lot of coalescence here. And particularly – I mean all these things are somewhat weighted too much towards the present – but a lot of them are saying that you know again I'd said *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *Deadwood*, they keep showing up in everybody's list.

KRISTOL: But I suppose the long form shows is related to cable surely, in the sense that when there are only three networks it's too expensive, I mean you can't afford to risk –

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: – you know building an audience over –

CANTOR: That's the great thing, again, that Rupert Murdoch brought about with Fox, was risk and experiment. He knew he had to take chances. And I mean it came up with *The Simpsons* and *The X-Files*. And I give him a lot of –

KRISTOL: Were they early in the Fox – I guess they were.

CANTOR: Yes, yes. Now *The Simpsons* grew out of *The Tracey Ullman Show*. But it's '89, it's already going. *The X-Files* I think begins '92. You know, I love *The X-Files*. First episode I saw I thought, "This is the stupidest thing I've ever seen on television." And Murdoch personally green-lighted these, both shows. The decision was his. And part of it was desperation. He knew he couldn't compete with the three networks by doing the same kinds of shows.

So "Let's do a primetime cartoon. Let's do a science fiction series with aliens and monsters." And it is interesting, what was it, *The X-Files* used to come on after *The Adventures of Brisco County*. Everybody at Fox thought well *Adventures of Brisco County*, that's our hit. Eh, we'll run this *X-Files*, it's Friday night, who cares? But, you know, no one's heard of *The Adventures of Brisco County* anymore.

So, and then the same thing with the cable networks, with HBO and Showtime. They had to get subscribers so they had to do things. And of course they had a lot of airtime in which they just did repeats. And so you could run a show five times in a week and build the audience.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And then, and streaming now makes that even more possible. You know, as someone who writes about television, my first book was VCR-based, and my second book was DVD-based and Blu-Ray based. So to find one quotation, to fast forward through a VCR tape, and then how much easier it is with DVDs and Blu-rays. And so just the scholarship has become so much easier. And that's part of canonizing the shows.

KRISTOL: I still, and I guess I like your point about the novel: it's not just a gradually longer short story. I mean it is – somehow these breakthroughs are partly technology and partly someone just conceives, or some people conceive, something that wasn't quite conceived before.

CANTOR: Yeah, I mean that's –

KRISTOL: Like why do we have to end everything in an hour? Why can't we have an ongoing story?

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: When you say it like that, when one says it like that, one thinks, "Well obvious, that's such an obvious possibility. Why didn't people try it earlier you know?"

CANTOR: Well, I mean the whole way television was set up with sponsorship. Now for example, Sherwood Schwartz, the producer of *Gilligan's Island*, wrote a really interesting piece on what created the vast wasteland on television. And it was that phrase, that phrase came from Newton Minow, the chairman of the FCC, called television "a vast wasteland."

Now this all started the, for fans of *Gilligan's Island*, you may remember the boat was called *The Minnow* and it was Schwarz's dig at Newton Minow because Minow was the guy who put the pressure on the networks to clean up their act, that they weren't producing quality shows. And he forced the networks to create centralized programming. Up to that the model of television was direct sponsorship. You may remember how many shows in the '50s were "the Texaco this" or "the Lucky Strike that."

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And we forget, the networks just sold time; they didn't do the programming. So what you did, if you had an idea for a TV show, you got a sponsor. And once you got that sponsor they bought the time for you. And what Schwartz said about that era was: you had thousands of sponsors. So you could get an idea on the air just by convincing one company to sponsor you.

Once under pressure from Minow, the networks created programming, heads of programming. Remember Fred Silverman was that legendary head of programming. Basically what Schwartz said three people in Hollywood determined what was on television. Head of programming at ABC, NBC, and CBS and that's why you've got the low point of '60s television, where *Beverly Hillbillies* succeeds.

Okay, if we can take hillbillies and take them to a big city, let's take big city people and send them to the country. And then you have *Green Acres* and so on, and this incredible copycat in television. And Schwartz points out that Minow inadvertently created the vast wasteland because his model of television was a top-down, government, bureaucratic model where there had to be a head of programming to determine what was good.

Whereas the more open free-for-all system before had worked better, and people were pretty soon talking about the '50s as this Golden Age of Television and the blandest year of television is the '60s and '70s, especially the '60s. And then it was Rupert Murdoch and Fox breaking the triopoly of the big networks.

What you want in art is lots of stuff. Nature is prodigal. We know this from evolution, nature does not work efficiently. You know many, just in terms of breeding, many animals have to produce thousands of offspring for only one of them to survive. And certainly evolution takes that form. Evolution is not a goal directed process.

In retrospect we think it is; again the great work of Stephen Jay Gould in this regard showing that evolution results from nature trying out thousands of things and seeing what works. Well you know art is that way. I always say that culture is a pyramid, it's a few gems on a mountain of garbage. And it's what's frustrating to people.

KRISTOL: You can't know ahead of time of course what's going to be the –

CANTOR: Right, and that's the thing. No one can tell you ahead of time that a show about a high school teacher who becomes a meth manufacturer is going to be the greatest show in the history of television. If you went to a commission, the high arts commission in this city of D.C. and submitted that as a possibility people would just laugh that away. Or say, "Well we're going to do a cartoon about this family in this town Springfield."

You know the history of art is filled with things like that. No one knew Shakespeare was going to be Shakespeare. To me, that's why there's a connection between popular culture and what we call high culture. The high culture grows out of the popular culture.

KRISTOL: It sounds like the general conclusion you draw is both sort of, if I can put it this way is libertarian and populist, I mean.

CANTOR: Yes, yeah, yeah.

KRISTOL: I mean in a certain way, precisely for the sake of high art and for the sake of excellence, you need to have a lot of things happening at once.

CANTOR: You know, so often we're all Monday morning quarterbacks. We all have perfect 20/20 vision in hindsight, as if somehow *King Lear* was inevitable. But again, who would have predicted, "Well guys I'm going to write a play about this old king and he divides up his kingdom?" "Come on Bill that's been done a hundred times." "But I'm going to do it better." "No, no. Well, you did okay with that *Othello* thing. We'll give you another shot here. We didn't think that was going to work either."



But we all think we're such geniuses in judging art because we know what worked. Very few of us could have predicted it. And so that's why you don't want a system that's top down. You want a system that allows people to experiment and also to learn from their experiments.

One of the things I've learned more as I've studied popular culture and culture in general is the importance of feedback. There really is an important feedback loop. And so for example with the X-Files, it was the first show to develop an internet following. And Chris Carter, running the show. They monitored the internet and they created these characters the Lone Gunmen and it was supposed to be just one episode. The internet lit up because these characters were internet nerds and the internet nerds loved them. And so they brought them back. Eventually they got their own spin off show. And you'll see when you read accounts from TV creators now they are very attuned into what their audience is thinking.

And the audience is not always wrong. Again that's a high romantic, high modernist myth that catering to your audience is the biggest mistake you can – *Casablanca* is a very interesting case if I can talk about a movie.

KRISTOL: Please.

CANTOR: Pertains, you know many people regard that as one of the five greatest movies of all time. And Roger Ebert talked about it as perfect. That there's not a wrong move or word in the whole script, you know just the way Salieri talks about Mozart in Peter Schaffer's *Amadeus* play. And you know it turns out it had a minimum of nine screenwriters, working separately, but two of them, the Epstein brothers worked together.

And there, no one could find an ending to the movie. Ingrid Bergman was screaming, "How can I do it? I don't know if I'm going with Rick or with Laszlo. I've got to know. I'm acting." And finally they gave it to the Epstein brothers who'd been brought in by the way to write jokes. They were, they were script doctors and they were great at adding humor to films. And they've recounted what happened, they were driving to work one day and they said, "Well, what does the audience want to happen at the end?"

"Oh, they want Major Strasser killed, surely they want Major Strasser killed." And they said, "Well who do you think they'd want to kill him? Well Rick." And so they just came up with that ending, which is regarded as one of the greatest endings of all time, by just trying to imagine: what does the audience want?

And then the funniest thing is, I think Hal Wallace was the producer, he still didn't like the ending. And he said we got to have, "this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship." We gotta have that line. If you watch the film, Bogart and Rains have their back to the camera at that moment. It was not shot initially. They wanted Rains back but he was under – they brought in Bogart just to voiceover to have that ending and people think that's an integral part, you know they must have had this in mind from the beginning.

So again, it's like sausages, you really don't want to see how they're made.

KRISTOL: I mean the greatest art, one presumably would want to take the position, is more of intention of the whole right?

CANTOR: You know, but –

KRISTOL: And parts of *Casablanca* seem to have that, the Marseillaise scene and stuff. People have, I happened to read something, people seem to have analyzed that and shown how carefully it's done to try to, with the emotions of the woman, you know.

CANTOR: Now that is, that's retrospect.

KRISTOL: Yeah, was that a myth?

CANTOR: You know I originally came out of the school of New Criticism and thinking everything has to be planned out perfectly in advance. And yet the more I have studied art and where you can see accounts of how it was actually made, there's a lot of things in life that are better produced by chance and good luck.

You know one wants to think that Shakespeare, greatest genius ever, planned everything out in advance. But there are elements of contingency in his plays, for example we can see he was working with certain actors in mind. He was part of the company, he was himself an actor. He knew exactly what these actors could and could not do.

And we see in his early plays the comic figure is a clown and these parts were written for a man named Will Kempe, who was very good at dancing and Kempe's jig was very famous and he was very good at little dialogues with himself. And so you look at Lancelot Gobbo in *Merchant of Venice*, it's clearly Will Kempe, written for him.

And Will Kempe pulls a David Caruso and leaves the company. He's too big for it – he wants to start his own company. And Shakespeare is stuck, he hasn't got Will Kempe anymore. And along comes a guy named Robert Armin who was very good at playing fools. And evidently had a beautiful singing voice and suddenly you've got Touchstone in *Twelfth Night*. The fool and so on. And then I think Shakespeare said, "Oh man this guy is so good, I'm going to write a fool like no one's ever seen before." And that was *King Lear* and I don't think we'd have *King Lear* if it weren't for Robert Armin.

I'm not saying that Shakespeare when he got the ball couldn't run with it.

KRISTOL: Yeah, so he's still thinking it through once he, given what he's working with.

CANTOR: Yeah, but you know, to try to think, "Oh Shakespeare just thought of this fool." So again we – Art, the way we imagined the creation of art is all Monday morning quarterbacking. It's all seeing it in retrospect and not seeing how it actually happened.

And now we get all these accounts of things. You know I was watching the DVDs of *Lord of the Rings* which I love, and they have all these special added items on the DVDs. There's a scene where Peter Jackson is saying, "This is *The Hobbit* set. We just built it, and here it is. We hope this is going to work out."

And I was just thinking, you know if we had a DVD of Shakespeare saying, "Well this is the first production of *Hamlet* here. Burbage is going to play it. Here's his makeup." How wonderful that would be to have.

But when you actually get the information, you know the great line in *The Godfather*: "Leave the gun, take the cannolis." I mean surely that was in Coppola's mind. No, Richard Castellano improvised it on the spot. And there it is. Or Brando in the death scene when he puts the orange in his mouth. That was, he improvised that. The genius is being able to see what works.

What we don't see, well in some cases we do see, the stuff that was cut out of the film and you look at the deleted scenes in *The Godfather* and they're all wonderful actually. But you realize that Coppola knew something about pacing and that they were cut out for the sake of the whole. So on great art, I mean, you know, Hitchcock storyboarded his films. He evidently planned them out –

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: – in advance and stuck to them no matter what. So it's possible. I don't want to rule out the possibility of the work of art that is perfectly planned in advance. But I think that's much rarer than we think it is. And it's a model that doesn't work very well in things like drama or movies or television where there's a production process over time and lots of people have to be involved. And I think you would find that great artists are flexible.

Again we have this image, I just for the first time last night watched an episode of this *Genius* Picasso thing on National Geographic. And it's just more of that stuff of the artist is this self-legislating figure and everyone else is wrong and only he's right and knows exactly what he's doing. And it's, you know I'm kind of sick of that myth at this point, because what I see is that I remember a very good screenwriter, a Hollywood comedy writer came to the University of Virginia to talk to the students and he was really wonderful and helpful. Telling what it took to succeed in Hollywood. And one of the things he said was when you have an idea, good comedy idea, you fight for that in the writers' room. You fight and you fight and you fight for it for five minutes and if you haven't convinced them, give up because you'll never last in Hollywood if you can't work as a team.

And again Shakespeare was very unusual, he wrote his plays pretty much by himself. Some of the ones at the beginning, some of the ones at the end are co-authored, but by comparison, most of the authors then worked as co-authors. They had script doctors. It's possible Shakespeare was brought in as a script doctor on the Thomas More play, because the only thing we have written in his handwriting is a scene from this Thomas More play.

But here, for example, Christopher Marlowe evidently couldn't write comedy. Brought in this guy named Samuel Rowley to write the comic scenes in *Doctor Faustus*. And we know because there's an entry for five pounds in the theater manager, "five pounds Rowley, scenes from *Doctor Faustus*." And so we know it happened.

But Shakespeare could write comedy. As our boy Frances Meres figured out, "best in comedy, best in tragedy."

KRISTOL: Well that's very unusual.

CANTOR: Yes, it was very unusual, and he could do it. But even he, you know he worked with Robert Greene on an early play, some people are now claiming one of the *Henry VI* play is co-authored with Christopher Marlowe.

We know that the end of his life he started writing plays with John Fletcher because he was looking forward to retirement, wanted a replacement and so figured he'd train Fletcher. And indeed with his co-writer Frances Beaumont, they were the next big thing. And they were as successful as Shakespeare for the next decade. Shakespeare could go back to Stratford and count his money because he was a stockholder in the theatre company. He was so good he got a percentage of the gross. Unlike any other author at the time, he could demand a percentage of the gross.

But, so I, you know I grew up on the great author, great genius model and it's in a way seductive.

The way you want to think about it, but the more I've seen over the years, you know even *Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles directed it and starred in it, wrote it, wrote the music. It's not true. Joseph Mankiewicz was the co-author [CORRECTION: Herman Mankiewicz]. And you know we're very attracted to the idea of the single genius, again I saw it written all over this Picasso thing. You know Picasso was a genius, but he wasn't this isolated genius working at some level above the rest of humanity.

And if Shakespeare, you know Shakespeare was an actor. These people who say that William Shakespeare could not have written the plays. You know I got into a debate in the *Weekly Standard* over this and Charlton Heston came to my rescue by saying the only thing we know about the man who wrote

these plays is he was an actor, and William Shakespeare was an actor. He said: "I'm an actor, I played in Shakespeare. This guy knows what an actor needs."

That Act Three is really tough for Hamlet, and he needs to get off the stage for act four so he can come back in Act Five; and lo and behold in *Hamlet*, Act Four is about Ophelia and Laertes and Hamlet can go off, take a hard drink and you know. Heston saw that, that the man who wrote these plays was a practical man of the theatre. And I'd never seen that argument before. And to me it settles this generally ridiculous question of who wrote the plays. Yeah, William Shakespeare wrote the plays. Francis Meres said in 1598.

Anyway, but the more I've seen studying all these different media is that certain rules apply across the board. And one of them is some kind of feedback with the audience.

Dickens, Let's see it's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he didn't even think of it as a novel when he wrote it. And then lots of sales, and the installments especially around this character Little Nell, and suddenly he says, "This is going to be a novel about Little Nell." Hundred thousand copies can't be wrong.

So we do, again this comes out of romanticism and high modernism. The idea that art must be shielded from all commercial considerations is really wrong. And again the irony is you know high modernism – I'm talking about Joyce and Eliot and Pound here – was such an elitist form.

But the great modern form is the motion picture. That's true modernism and it was a commercial art. And again, the same thing now with television, that people with real artistic impulses are going to television. The financial reward is enormous.

And also they have more control. You know movies are a director's medium and the central figure is the director. There's a person who's going to get what's up on the screen. It's the director, and writers find movies very frustrating, because their scripts are rewritten and rewritten. Whereas in television the production schedule is such that the writer is in charge. And what's now called the show runner, who is you know basically writes a lot of the show, and is in charge of the writers room.

So for example Vince Gilligan, I had a chance to meet him once at the Virginia Film Festival. He was incredibly nice to me. I think he thought *Gilligan Unbound*, my first book, was about him.

KRISTOL: Yeah, right.

CANTOR: I didn't disillusion him, because I think he's a genius, and I did write about him in that book, and I'm writing about him in my new book. But he went out to Hollywood having won a prize at the Virginia Film Festival to have a screenplay developed. And indeed, it eventually was produced, but it bore very little resemblance to the thing he'd written.

Whereas he found working on *The X-Files* that the thing he wrote, it was only eight days to produce it, they couldn't mess around with it that much. And so he discovered that you can get, as a writer you have more control over what gets on the screen in television. And so on he went, on now doing *Better Call Saul*, which I would put that in my top five, along with those other five.

I mean that's got, it's not a sequel, it's a prequel. But it's just genius, that show. There they were backed into a corner with the characters already seemingly fully developed, and now they have to show how they in fact became what they are. It has been so surprising, what they've done with the characters. And it's emerging to be as good as *Breaking Bad*. And that will be truly amazing, if he can produce back-to-back series of those qualities. He really is a genius and willing to talk about it.

And now, for example, they would plan out a whole season, get all the writers together. Plan out the arc of the season and they'd sketch each show in four or five units. You know in between commercials and

stuff and then they'd assign each episode to a different writer, who then had to script it, they'd then bring it back and they all go over it.

And so that's a complex interplay of planning and improvisation and feedback. And "too many cooks spoil the broth" is not the rule of artistic creation. And we've been brought up on that. That nothing should tamper with the artist's vision. And it turns out that feedback is one of the most important things; that no matter how good you are, it really helps for someone to say, "Well, wait a minute, what about this? How about that ending?" And so on.

So I mean, again, I started out, I come out of an English literature background studying poems of Yeats and things that really seem to be these perfect objects of creation. It turns out, even there he constantly revised his poems. "Leda and the Swan" had an opening stanza which he wisely left out, it's much better for that reason.

But I grew out of that world where we were taught that these artists are geniuses. Everything was perfection, everything's planned in advance. Leave them alone. Don't touch them. Don't say anything negative about their work. But it turns out, that's not the real world out of which art emerges. In some ways it is a more human process.

And when you think about it I mean again the model is evolution. I mean creating the human body is quite a remarkable achievement, it seems so well planned and so well designed. And that's creationism and now you know a lot of people accept evolutionism.

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: And how could this have been done without intelligent design? And maybe there's some truth to that argument. But evolution, biological evolution, may very well be a blind process in which trial and error and huge amounts of time is what makes things come out and look fitting.

KRISTOL: Yeah.

CANTOR: You know, one could call it "just so stories." Again Gould is very good writing about this. His writings on evolution have been a great influence on how I now think about art.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I can tell.

CANTOR: That, what I now say, "I look for intentionality, not intention." That things, there are so many things in the world that look intentional that turned out to be a product of a process. The market itself, the way the economy works. And here Mises and Hayek taught me a lot about how you can have intentionality without intention, or human action without human design, to use Hayek's formula.

So, so many things that looked designed, but it turns out they are the result of a process of variation and feedback, where you try out lots of possibilities and then cull out the ones that work. And that seems to be something that happens in a lot of artistic creation, more so than we think.

KRISTOL: Well, this has been a surprisingly subversive conversation. I think – and I'm sure various of our friends will find things to differ with us – I think all your colleagues and all the whole artistic world, which is good, which is good. Make them think. And I'm mostly convinced. I like to save a little more for intention and design than you do in that last, but that's maybe that's another conversation, a longer conversation.

CANTOR: Okay, okay. No, I'm going to try to develop these ideas into a book.

KRISTOL: That's very interesting though. Anyway, this has been a great conversation on television, the canon, Shakespeare, movies, everything else too.

CANTOR: Yeah, we covered a lot.

KRISTOL: That was great. So thank you Paul Cantor.

CANTOR: Thank you for having me.

KRISTOL: And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]