

### Conversations with Bill Kristol

**Guest:** Paul Cantor  
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#### Table of Contents

**I. Was Shakespeare Shakespeare? (0:15 – 43:05)**

**II: A Genius for All Time (43:05 – 1:20:23)**

**I. Was Shakespeare Shakespeare? (0:15 – 43:05)**

KRISTOL: Welcome to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, and I'm joined today by my friend, Paul Cantor, professor of English, University of Virginia, a frequent converser on CONVERSATIONS about Shakespeare, about which you've written books, important books, and [on] popular culture about which you've written important books. Paul's also the editor or curator, depending on which term you want, of the invaluable [website on Shakespeare and politics](#). You can find it by just googling "Shakespeare and politics." It shows up, right? Or go to [thegreatthinkers.org](#) and you'll see various great thinkers, one of whom is Shakespeare, maybe the greatest. Do you think?

CANTOR: No.

KRISTOL: No. Okay. [Laughter] We're sticking on the philosophers. We're sticking with Plato. We're sticking with Plato.

CANTOR: He's the best playwright on the list, I'll guarantee that.

KRISTOL: That seems like a good bet. Anyway, thank you for joining me today. And the genesis of this conversation was an [article](#) in *The Atlantic* a few months ago that we emailed about, claiming that maybe Shakespeare was a woman. And I was astonished. That this was what I took to be some old kind of "Shakespeare-is-not-Shakespeare" trope that turned out to have a life today. And you actually knew a lot about it, have done further research. So, was Shakespeare, Shakespeare?

CANTOR: Yes. Shakespeare was Shakespeare. I've looked at pictures of Francis Bacon, and I've looked at pictures of the Earl of Oxford. They don't look a thing like Shakespeare. So they can't have written those plays. Come on.

KRISTOL: Okay so why does everyone want to – What's with the whole – I think this is kind of unusual if you think about it, in the history of literature, or philosophy or art, this whole cottage industry, which has gone on for quite a long time now with different iterations, which we'll get to, of "other people must have been Shakespeare." So what's going on?

CANTOR: Yeah. I can't frankly understand it, but let's begin with this example just to cite a few things here. The author of the article is Elizabeth Winkler, and it does appear in the June 2019 issue of *The Atlantic*, and it's titled, *Was Shakespeare a Woman?*

And she chooses a woman named Emilia Bassano, who is actually reasonably well known in Shakespeare scholarship. A man named A.L. Rowse identified her as the infamous "dark lady" in Shakespeare's sonnets. She was of Italian descent in a family of musicians who lived in Elizabethan England, and are fairly well-known. And so she wrote poetry. But suddenly Elizabeth Winkler decided that she wrote Shakespeare's plays.

And it's a very confessional piece. She begins with the fact that she's been to a lot of Shakespeare plays, and she's very impressed with the female characters. And they're presented sympathetically; they're often presented heroically, and they show great insight into the female character.

KRISTOL: All of which I think is true. The female characters are often much superior to their male counterparts in the comedies.

CANTOR: Yes. Especially in the comedies. And I've seen the formulation for Shakespeare: "tragedy is where men rule the world, and comedy is where women rule the world." And there's a certain truth to that.

But from this, Winkler concludes that the person who wrote the plays had to be a woman. Now that seems to be very fallacious reasoning from the start because Shakespeare also portrays men sympathetically. And he portrays men as very interesting, and deep, complex characters, so why shouldn't a man have written it?

And it does strike me as an extreme example of the obsession with identity in contemporary literary criticism that the first thing you have to find out about an author is: is the author male? Female? Lower class? Upper class? Black? White? Everything turns on the issue of the identity, and all literature is simply the expression of identity.

I don't think that was Shakespeare's view. In fact, it's been a traditional view of Shakespeare that the miracle in Shakespeare is his ability to suppress his identity and get himself into all sorts of different characters.

The great poet John Keats, who understood Shakespeare very well, and was able to imitate Shakespeare's style in ways that very few people have been able to, he spoke of Shakespeare as the "chameleon poet." And by that he meant he could just adapt himself to any identity.

KRISTOL: That was praise, of course.

CANTOR: Yes, that was praise.

KRISTOL: Unlike being a chameleon in politics.

CANTOR: Yes. [Laughter].

But the great line in Keats was, "he could imagine an Imogen as well as an Iago." Now we all know Iago, the great villain of *Othello*. Imogen is the heroine in the play *Cymbeline*, and is a truly innocent and wonderful young woman. And you see the point, "he can imagine an Imogen as well as an Iago." That's precisely the point that Winkler and many of the anti-Shakespeareans deny. They are really denying the fundamental fact of the human imagination, that the real ability of a great dramatist, and especially Shakespeare, is to get out of his own identity, in a way to suppress his identity.

Jorge Luis Borges wrote an essay about this in which he said that “Shakespeare’s everything and nothing,” meaning that he could well have been a cypher as a human being, a very ordinary human being, and what he had was the ability to imagine himself into a range of identities.

And that’s actually what upsets me about this approach to Shakespeare. It denies his imaginative ability and really denies the power of the imagination itself.

And it often gets quite literal. I just I want to be able to cite a few things here to show I’m not making this up. But here’s part of Winkler’s argument about Shakespeare: “Yet he left behind not a single book, though the plays draw on hundreds of texts, including some in Italian and French that hadn’t yet been translated into English. Nor did he leave any musical instruments, though the plays use at least 300 musical terms and refer to 26 instruments.”

This is bizarre reasoning. For Shakespeare to mention 26 musical instruments he had to *own* each one of them, and moreover detail them in his will? In fact, scholars who have looked into Elizabethan inheritance law have shown that typically wills did not list objects; there were separate inventories. But really, Shakespeare had to *own* each instrument he wrote about and will it specifically to his heirs?

On the matter of books, it’s very complicated, and we’ll come back to it. But it has been shown that Shakespeare’s son-in-law, in the very same house that he inherited from Shakespeare, in the inventory of that house there were books. So where did they come from? We don’t know. But the fact is we don’t know that Shakespeare didn’t own any books simply because they’re not listed in his will. I own thousands upon thousands of books, some of which I have with me here, and they’re not listed in my will. I’m going to dispose of them differently.

So this is what I object to. But I have to say this is what makes this kind of thing persuasive, that someone reading this would say, “Oh, yeah. Where are all the books and where are the musical instruments?”

Now I don’t want to go through the article line-by-line, but I do want to get to the key point for me where she says, “I was stunned to realize that the year when Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* was likely completed—1611--was the same year Bassano published a book of poetry *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (Hail God, King of the Jews). Her writing style bears no obvious resemblance to Shakespeare’s in his plays – though one critic strains to suggest similarities – the overlap lies in the feminist content.” Now this, to me, is the weakest point in all these arguments, the stylistic point. Here we have poetry by Emilia Bassano, and it turns out it sounds nothing like Shakespeare.

Now we’re going to come back to this, maybe, when we get to Earl of Oxford. But at least in the case of Earl of Oxford, his poetry dates from very early in his life, and people are able to dismiss it as juvenilia, and say, “Even though this doesn’t sound like Shakespeare, he had years to develop the style that is distinctively his.”

But here Winkler is insisting on the fact that “wow, Shakespeare published something, finished a play in 1611, and Bassano published a book of poetry at that time.”

Now I’m just going to read one brief passage from her poem and then read something from *The Winter’s Tale*. The poem is about the passion of Christ. It’s a very religious poem, and I have chosen randomly, basically, a passage about Adam and Eve. This will show you the feminist content of the work because it’s arguing that Adam was more at fault in the fall of man than Eve was. “But surely Adam cannot be excused. Her fault” – Eve’s – “though great, yet he was most to blame. What weakness offered, strength might have refused, being lord of all the greater was his shame, although the serpent’s craft had her abused, God’s holy word ought all his action frame. For he was lord and king of all the earth before poor Eve had either life or breath, who being framed by God’s eternal hand, the perfectest man that ever had breathed on earth. And from God’s mouth received that straight command. The breach whereof he knew was present death; yea, having power to rule both sea and land, yet win one apple one to lose that breath, which God had breathed in his beauteous face, bringing us all in danger and disgrace.”

Now that's very bad poetry. And very unlike what Shakespeare was writing at the time. It's the kind of poetry you get from people who think poetry is what rhymes. And you will notice this all the time, to this day, that people think a poem has to rhyme, and more to the point, if it rhymes, it's got to be poetry. This is very conventional. It's end-stopped as we say in our profession. That is, the lines heavily end with the rhyme words. Many of the rhymes are off, like "earth" and "breath". And I don't think you'd find that kind of off-rhyme in Shakespeare.

And I'll just read a passage from *The Winter's Tale*. Again, this is supposed to convince us that Bassano wrote Shakespeare's plays. This is early in the play when the character Leontes has gotten jealous that a friend has seduced his wife. "Gone already! Inch-thick, knee-deep, o'er head and ears a forked one! Go, play, boy." This is--he's talking to this child who he now thinks is illegitimate. "Go, play, boy, play: thy mother plays, and I play too, but not so disgraced a part, whose issue will hiss me to my grave: contempt and clamor will be my knell. Go, play, boy, play. There have been, or I am much deceived, cuckolds ere now; and many a man there is, even at this present. Now while I speak this, holds his wife by the arm, that little thinks she has been sluiced in his absence and his pond fished by his next neighbor, by Sir Smile, his neighbor. Nay, there's comfort in it whiles other men have gates and those gates are as opened as mine."

Now this is dramatic, no end-stop lines, no rhyme. If you *knew* independently that Emilia Bassano had written Shakespeare's plays, you might desperately try to reconcile that poem with this play, but if you're talking about evidence that she wrote the plays, you have to have something stronger than that.

And indeed, it's amazing that she says the content is the same, but the style is different. Well style is what individuates authors, not content. Two different authors can say roughly the same thing but in different styles.

If we had handwriting here, something in Shakespeare's handwriting, and something in Bassano's handwriting, that's what we would use to determine who wrote what because handwriting is individual; it's specific to a certain person, whereas again, content can be general. They can be saying the same thing but in different styles.

So I find it really quite incredible that she allows that point in her own article. To me, that undermines the whole thing right there. And it shows how much we've lost sight of the style of poetry, and quite frankly, the quality.

KRISTOL: Yeah. For me, that's what striking. Similar content. Obviously anyone can have a feminist thought, and almost every serious thinker has at some point or another, from Plato on, or before Plato. But the idea that you then dismiss -- "well the style's somewhat different." But isn't -- ? And the quality?

CANTOR: Yeah. The style is what differentiates authors.

And it shows what has happened here in a lot of contemporary literary criticism that identity trumps every other aspect of literature. That what you're really looking for is "what is the identity of the author, and is he or she able to express it?" As if that's what literature, poetry, drama is about. And I do think this essay reflects a dilemma in contemporary criticism.

By the way, it attracted a lot of criticism. And even *The Atlantic* was forced to rewrite the headline of the issue because of some of the criticism of it.

But English studies have backed themselves into a corner at this point. So much has been devoted in the past few decades to showing the prejudices, the limitations of authors, the whole obsession with dead white males, the ideas, "how can we remain in thrall to these authors who come from an early period and do not share our contemporary enlightenment?"

I think it's one reason the humanities in general are in danger in colleges and universities today, in particular English departments are suffering large drops in enrollment. We, as English professors, used to champion the works we taught; that was our point to show people how great the literature of the past is, and how it could open their eyes to whole different worlds.

And increasingly, the way literature is taught, we're just learning that Shakespeare was a "creature of the patriarchy," as you would see in a play, let's say like *Taming of the Shrew*. That he was racist in his portrayal of Othello; that he was anti-Semitic in his portrayal of Shylock. There are some truths to this approach, and you can see some ways in which Shakespeare was bound by the views of his time, but that really doesn't make literature very welcoming to students, and I think they turned away from that.

So there has been a counter movement in literary studies, a desperate attempt to find that Shakespeare was a minority of some sort, to shift gears a bit. But this I think illustrates the point, there's been an increasing movement to claim that Shakespeare was a Catholic.

KRISTOL: Yeah, I've been struck by that. That seems to have slightly different champions from the "Shakespeare is a woman" thing.

CANTOR: Yeah, but I'll show you the relation. Now there are arguments on both sides here, though really the question is: was Shakespeare what is technically known as a recusant, someone living under the Protestant regime of Queen Elizabeth, who remained loyal to the old Catholicism?

And remember England had gone Protestant under Henry VIII. It had gone back to Catholicism under Queen Mary, and now back again to Protestantism under Queen Elizabeth. And certainly it was confusing to people at the time. And there was plenty of evidence that there were people who secretly maintained their Catholic faith; in some cases not that secretly.

And I can understand why Catholics would like Shakespeare to be Catholic. In general people want Shakespeare to agree with them. And it's almost that they feel this will legitimate whatever their beliefs are.

And quite frankly, I think Shakespeare's greatest ability is to represent the world and represent it accurately. And it does allow for people to react to Shakespeare the way they react to the world. Shakespeare gives a very accurate portrayal of the political world. If you're right wing, you're going to find right wing thoughts in Shakespeare; if you're left wing, you're going to find left wing thoughts.

I take great credit. I'm a libertarian and I never thought that Shakespeare was a libertarian. I'm willing to face –

KRISTOL: Further research will allow you to discover this. [Laughter]

CANTOR: No. I show that Ben Jonson's play, *Bartholomew Fair* is a libertarian play with deep associations with Friedrich Hayek. So I've done my bit there.

But Shakespeare, I've just read him and read him, and I don't think he was a libertarian.

KRISTOL: *Measure for Measure*, no? There's a little bit of libertarian-ism there, you know.

CANTOR: Yes. But I believe he had an aristocratic worldview.

Anyway, but I'd just like to say, I'm an exception in that respect, that everyone feels they've got to get Shakespeare on their side.

Again, I think it's understandable that Catholics have argued that Shakespeare was Catholic. By the way, I think an honest reading of his plays shows that he was anti-Catholic. In the terms of his day that he wanted religion taken out of politics. And you can see it in his history plays, you can see it in *Measure for*

*Measure*, that he thought having a Catholic politics would be disastrous. Anyway, that's a subject for another conversation.

But in any case, what surprised me is when non-Catholic critics start arguing for Shakespeare as Catholic. And this would include Stephen Greenblatt and a whole set of critics, many of whom are Jewish and have no Catholic axe to grind.

And I was actually a little puzzled by it. I was reviewing Michael Woods, I think it's called – *In Search of Shakespeare* – when I first realized, “Aha, now we can say he's a minority. He's an oppressed minority as a Catholic under the oppressive Elizabethan regime.” And increasingly, critics present Elizabeth's regime as oppressive, and there's a great deal of truth to that. But the idea – It's bad enough that Shakespeare's a dead white male, but he's a WASP, he's a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

KRISTOL: Who got along with the regime of the establishment of the time.

CANTOR: Yeah, his plays are performed at court and so on. But if he could be a Catholic, then you could have him in a minority position. He's persecuted. He's speaking truth to power. And I do think he *was*, but not for this reason.

By the way, I do not think he was at all a creature of the establishment. I, for example, have argued that he was a republican, small “r”. That his plays about Rome were an attempt to revive the idea of Roman republicanism, and to modify the British monarchy in the direction of the mixed regime of the Roman Republic. And I think he actually succeeded in that task. But anyway, just to show I'm not taking a conventional view of Shakespeare myself.

But here you have the idea, if Shakespeare is a Catholic, then we can start invoking all our methods of reading people who are outside the mainstream, and battling persecution, and championing a minority cause. And so the other side of that would be to say these plays are written by a woman.

Now it's a kind of fantasy. Again, what troubled me and a lot of other people about this article is that the evidence is very weak in it. And Winkler more or less admits, “I'm sitting there in the play; and I'm thinking it's really giving good portrayals of women. Oh, a woman must have written these plays.” And it's just, “I wish this was true, so it is true.”

And it's another illustration of how postmodernism has corrupted our world. This post-modern claim that there is no truth with a capital T has now opened us up to all sorts of fake news. And it is now, fake news in the academic world.

It's clear *The Atlantic* published this because they thought it would sell copies and get interest. And it did. And again it would be the idea, “Well, we got attention. Who cares if it's mainly negative attention? Our name is in the news.” And that, by the way, is what stokes this whole movement, and keeps it alive, almost two centuries at this point; that it's not news that Shakespeare wrote his plays. We all know that. But it is news if Francis Bacon wrote them, or the Earl of Oxford, or Emilia Bassano.

KRISTOL: Let's go back maybe then to the beginning of this movement. There's this sort of post-modern attempt to say Shakespeare wasn't Shakespeare, maybe couldn't have been Shakespeare. But the early movement – it's not coming out of nowhere. So there's a long history of this ‘Shakespeare denial’ or whatever you want to call it.

CANTOR: Although it's not as long as some people think. *The Atlantic's* original sub-header was, “The authorship controversy, almost as old as the works themselves, has yet to surface a compelling alternative to the man buried in Stratford.” Well as people quickly pointed out, the authorship controversy is not as old as the plays themselves. Shakespeare was controversial in his day, and there were arguments whether he was stealing from other authors, and so on. But no one at the time doubted that Shakespeare wrote the plays.

If you go online *now* to “Was Shakespeare a Woman,” what you read is “the authorship controversy has yet to surface a compelling alternative.” This is the problem in the world of the Internet, the history just gets rewritten, and it’s an interesting case that that did happen.

Anyway, to give credit where credit is due, the first person to question seriously that Shakespeare wrote his plays was named James Wilmot, and this was in 1785.

KRISTOL: Is that right? That late? So basically in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, all these 17<sup>th</sup> century critics and poets, and 18<sup>th</sup> century, of which there were a ton, appreciators of Shakespeare, they had no issue. It was just that was Shakespeare, and they discussed the plays, and there was none of this.

CANTOR: There’s a false idea that there are only a few references to Shakespeare in his time. There are dozens upon dozens of references: people writing poems and tributes to him, people referring to him as the author of the plays and as a great poet. We talked in one of our preceding conversations about Sir Francis Meres, and his *Palladis Tamia* where he’d list the great playwrights of his day, and presents Shakespeare as the greatest of them.

KRISTOL: Shortly after – I mean I don’t know much about this – in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, it’s taken for granted that he’s a very great writer. It’s not like he’s obscure. It’s not like Mozart or something who was forgotten for a decade.

CANTOR: Yes. He got eclipsed by his sidekick, John Fletcher, after Fletcher replaced him as the main playwright for *The King’s Men*. But as soon as plays were revived in 1660 with the Restoration his plays were revived, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century he emerged as –

KRISTOL: – as the Bard. You see this even in the *Federalist Papers*. There’s a quote in *Federalist 2*, I think it’s “if we may quote the Bard,” they don’t even mention Shakespeare’s name as I recall.

CANTOR: Now the best book on this controversy is by James Shapiro, and it’s called *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* Great title.

KRISTOL: Good title.

CANTOR: *Contested Will*. I wish I could come up with titles like that. But he points out it was only when Shakespeare became idolized, and indeed turned into a god that heretics became possible. It’s a very interesting way of looking at it.

KRISTOL: Yeah. It makes sense.

CANTOR: Let’s say people could live with the thought that this guy from Stratford was a very good playwright, but once you claimed he was a *god*, and that’s the language used by the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, that you encourage people to think, “Well, this can’t have been so great. At least not some country bumpkin from Warwickshire, can’t be so great.” And so it encouraged people to start –

KRISTOL: So the line of attack is less, “he’s not a god; the plays are all flawed.” But rather – I guess that would be one possible line of attack. The other possible line of attack is, “he didn’t write them.”

CANTOR: Right. Exactly. And that’s when you start to get these arguments. Again, Francis Bacon was the first alternative proposed, and I have here just to thrill you and the audience, this is a first printing, first edition, of the first book ever to question that Shakespeare wrote his plays. It’s called *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded* by Delia Bacon. Now, no relation to Francis, but towards the end of her life, she started to think she was. This extremely valuable book, which I purchased for five dollars in a used book store.

KRISTOL: You can email us if you’re interested in making a really outlandish offer for this book.  
[Laughter]

CANTOR: Indeed. It's in pretty good condition, no markings.

KRISTOL: When did she write this?

CANTOR: In 1857.

KRISTOL: Oh, that late.

CANTOR: I brought it to show that this whole controversy really is quite late. There were various comments and theories going around, but the first serious book, the first serious challenge to Shakespeare's authorship was 1857. So recent I own a copy of the first printing of it. And I just had it authenticated by a bibliographer that it is the first printing.

Now it's actually a pretty remarkable book. And for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne not only wrote a preface for it, but he paid for its printing in England, he was so impressed with her. Though he was rather cagey in the preface in not saying that he agrees with her.

Now this book is talked about but very seldom read. In fact, I read one comment on it that said *no one* has ever read it. And I have to confess there may be some truth to that. It is, perhaps, the most unreadable book I've ever seen. It's 700 pages long in very small print. I've now read about 300 pages of it, and not consecutively. I've read the first 100 pages, the last 100 pages, and the middle 100 pages. It is one of the strangest books ever written. She writes very well, though her sentences are infinitely long. Her prose is overheated, she's making titanic claims on every other page about changing the world.

I'm going to try to state her thesis, but it's very hard because she never does. It's very hard to understand how weird this book is.

KRISTOL: But it gives birth to a whole theory.

CANTOR: Yes. She almost never names names. Everything is periphrasis. She'll be talking about "the only man in England who's great enough to have comprehended a subject of such depth." Now she should say Francis Bacon, but she won't. You can read for pages and not be sure who she's talking about.

But as far as I can gather her thesis, it is that the Elizabethan era was one of great repression, that Elizabeth ruled as a tyrant, and the writers at the time reacting to this absolutism of the Tudor regime could not speak openly, and therefore, they had to find coded ways to write. In fact, she talks openly about esoteric writing. She is like the Leo Strauss of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. And it's quite remarkable. I don't have time to read passages, but there are extended passages about the nature of esoteric writing, that in the era of persecution authors have to learn to write secretly. And she believes that Shakespeare's plays are the esoteric expression of Bacon's philosophy. But this is all in conjunction with Sir Walter Raleigh as well.

She's a real conspiracy theorist. She believes that the men who opposed Elizabeth's regime, and wanted to end Tudor absolutism, were working secretly to subvert the regime. She chooses Walter Raleigh as her first example, and discusses him at great length. But then she sees Raleigh in league with Bacon, and she brings in the great poet Edmund Spenser. She actually mentions the Earl of Oxford. She claims there was this conspiracy of philosophical opponents of Elizabethan tyranny who wrote works like Bacon's *Novum Organum* and *The Advancement of Learning*, but settled upon plays to be the means of getting this message out to the audience. And that's where we get Shakespeare's plays.

Now, again, there are remarkable passages where she uses the word "esoteric" of writing, and she has read Bacon very carefully, particularly *The Advancement of Learning*. I've written about *The Advancement of Learning*, and so I know she's quoting the right passages. I know that because they're the same passages I quote in my essay on Francis Bacon. She knew Morse of Morse Code fame, and so

she was alive to the notion of cyphers, of coding, and so she came upon 20 pages in *The Advancement of Learning* that discuss codes. And they are really remarkable, they are tucked away in the middle of the book. And yet – I'm saying this now – they are the key to the whole book. Bacon's discussion of secret codes is a discussion of esoteric writing, and it's just an amazing example of esoteric writing. He seems to be talking about something as trivial as cryptograms, but he's really telling you how to write esoterically. And she understands that. And she works out Bacon – Bacon had something called the bilateral cypher. I could actually explain it but we don't have 20 minutes. But she understands the bilateral cypher, and she thinks it's at work in Shakespeare's plays.

KRISTOL: They did use a lot of cyphers and codes in diplomatic correspondence, right? It wasn't a ridiculous –

CANTOR: Yes, yes. And you had Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth's spymaster, who was charged with tracking down these codes and breaking them. So there's an awful lot of truth in this book. And she writes at length about *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* which is my personal favorite among Shakespeare's plays, and I've written two books about it. She devotes more time to *Coriolanus* in this book –

KRISTOL: She's kind of the Paul Cantor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

CANTOR: Okay. Alright. I legendarily write clearly, and she does not.

KRISTOL: Yes, And you don't write 850 page books.

CANTOR: Yeah. It is so strange that I keep waiting for her to say what a play is about, and she never does. She hints at stuff. And the most frustrating thing about the book is she keeps saying she has another volume of historical studies that prove all this. And it's very possible she did, and no one would publish it. But all the *evidence* is not in the book; it's in an unpublished book that we have no access to.

KRISTOL: This would be a good project for you for the next few years. Dig it down in some country house, country manor, in England.

CANTOR: She is American, I'll say. She went over to England with the project of digging up Shakespeare's grave so that she could find the manuscripts of his plays. And she was not allowed to do it. And then she wanted to dig up Bacon's tomb to find the manuscripts.

I've been hesitant to say, she went insane two years after this book came out; it's actually a very sad story. And there are hints in this book that she was on her way, and in that sense I don't want to impugn her. I'm saying much nicer things about her than almost anyone does.

KRISTOL: Anyway, so she gets this whole thing going. And what is the thrust of the general arguments that then take over in the Shakespeare – Why can't Shakespeare be Shakespeare according to the 19<sup>th</sup> century types?

CANTOR: I should start with that. The basic argument turns on education. The idea is that we have no records of Shakespeare's education. And in fact, we don't have records of his non-education because the records of the grammar school in Stratford have been lost. We do know a lot about that grammar school, and Shakespeare probably went there because his father was virtually mayor of Stratford at one point, and was a wealthy tradesman; he was a glover, he was in the glove trade.

And one thing we know is these students in Stratford were very well educated in Latin. People have said they probably came out of that high school knowing Latin better than most classics majors at colleges today. One thing they did, for example--again we have records what the curriculum was--they were reading Virgil, they were reading Ovid. One thing they would have to do is translate a passage in Latin into English, and then re-translate it into Latin without making reference to the original. That really teaches you Latin.

Ben Jonson famously said of Shakespeare that he had small Latin and less Greek. But Ben Jonson was one of the great classical scholars of the age, so that means Shakespeare had a good deal of Latin and even knew Greek, probably knew New Testament Greek.

But anyway, the argument is that he was uneducated and didn't go to college. Now, it turns out Ben Jonson didn't go to college. Ben Jonson, who was the son of a bricklayer, got into the Westminster School in London. We'd call it a magnet school now. It's the best school in London, and got a great education there but never went to college.

A few of the playwrights like Christopher Marlowe went to college, and the group of them were even called the "University Wits." And it does seem that they made fun of Shakespeare when he first came to London for not having a college education. So, a lot of the argument is he didn't have a college education; he shows knowledge of foreign lands, such as Italy; his description of Venice is pretty accurate, he knows the businesses down on the Rialto; he knows what a gondola is. And of course, he displays a great knowledge of the aristocracy, and I'd say a really deep knowledge--that he understands the aristocratic nature as well as Plato and Aristotle do, for example. And so that's why people think that this 'man from Stratford,' as they refer to him, was not well-educated enough to write these plays.

KRISTOL: And also not from noble – It'd be better if he were from noble origins; too much of a commoner kind of?

CANTOR: Yes. Now remember, this is flourishing in the Victorian Era. And so, one thing you get is a late Puritan response to the vulgarity of the plays, all the dirty jokes, and all the double entendres. And people wished that wasn't part of the plays. So the argument would be that someone like Bacon wrote the plays, and he arranged to have them staged, and Shakespeare was the front man, but being this vulgar country bumpkin he added these dirty jokes to please the audience. You know, Shakespeare was highly bowdlerized, expurgated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

KRISTOL: When is Mr. Bowdler?

CANTOR: It's 19<sup>th</sup> century, mid-century [mistake: he's late 18<sup>th</sup>; early 19<sup>th</sup> century]. All these efforts to rewrite Shakespeare, clean the stuff up. And so that was the thinking in the Victorian period. And in a weird way this is all very middle-class. Though it's trying to conjure up an aristocratic Shakespeare, it's kind of a middle-class fantasy of the aristocrat as well-bred, contrary to the nature of these Elizabethan aristocrats who we'll see when we talk about the Earl of Oxford, were not exactly the most admirable people in the world.

But just to focus on the issue of college education. It's such a bourgeois thing to think that you need a college education to write a great work of literature. Obviously, throughout most of literary history, the authors didn't have college educations. But even when they did, it was not what we think of as a college education. Oxford and Cambridge, during Shakespeare's lifetime, and well before, and well beyond, were basically there to train ministers. You had to know Latin to be able to read the Vulgate, the translation of the Bible. You had to know some Greek to be able to read the New Testament. And insofar as there was a curriculum at Oxford, it was a curriculum in the classics, in that sense. But Shakespeare might well have been taught by an Oxford graduate in the Stratford grammar school. That's how he would have learned his Latin and Greek. But as to what else happened, they were basically social institutions.

Now, take Christopher Marlowe, who did go to Cambridge, but there's this strange fact about Christopher Marlowe that he didn't seem to spend much time at Cambridge. And indeed, when it came to degree time, Cambridge refused to grant him his degree. And Elizabeth's privy council had to intervene to order Cambridge to give Marlowe his degree because he was on Her Majesty's service. And if you're thinking James Bond here, you are correct. No one knows for sure, but the theory is that Marlowe had traveled to the Continent to spy on Catholic refugees, who were a problem for Elizabeth's regime. And he may have been mixing among these refugees to find out if any plots were going on against Elizabeth. That's the

best theory of why he was absent from class. But it gives you some idea what kind of education was he getting.

And you see that as well. Just to jump ahead to the Earl of Oxford here, it's another reason people offer him.

## **II: A Genius for All Time (43:05 – 1:20:23)**

KRISTOL: Who is a big candidate in this world for –

CANTOR: Besides Bacon, the other big candidate. And the two we'll discuss.

But the Earl of Oxford enrolled at Cambridge when he was eight years old. Now that seems prodigious to us. What an intellectual prodigy! And, "My, he must have had 1600 SAT scores." Well, it's just such an anachronistic view of what it meant to go to Oxford. It was there as like a finishing school. And here's the joke: there's no record of his ever getting a B.A. from Cambridge. He has *honorary* MA's from Cambridge and Oxford. And so this notion that he was this brilliant student who got this great education at Cambridge and Oxford, and you will see it quoted again and again that he had MA's from Oxford and Cambridge.

Now let me ask you something. How hard do you think it would be for the Earl of *Oxford* to get an honorary degree from *Oxford*?

KRISTOL: Plus he's this big-shot, right?

CANTOR: Yes

KRISTOL: He was very important politically.

CANTOR: His was the second oldest aristocratic family in England. And if he hadn't screwed up his whole life, he would have been a close counselor of Queen Elizabeth. But you know what honorary degrees are like today. They are, "Here's your degree. Write us a check." Even today, you can observe a certain corruption in academic life that particularly honorary degrees are not necessarily a reflection of some kind of intellectual brilliance.

So we're told, "Oxford must have written the plays because he had MA's from Oxford and Cambridge." But, again, how much does it take for the Earl of Oxford to get a degree from Oxford?

KRISTOL: How much of this is about Bacon or Oxford? In Delia Bacon's case, it's sort of about Bacon. And how much of it is about "it can't be Shakespeare, he's this commoner, and he's an actor?" I mean talk a little bit about that, that they don't like the idea of some guy who's come from Stanford [sic] –

CANTOR: That would be worse. [Laughter]

KRISTOL: Stanford? That would be terrible. [Laughter]. I mean Stratford. Comes to London, and just becomes, I guess, partly an owner and partly a player in this thing.

CANTOR: Another very interesting aspect to it is the anti-commercial spirit, which is so characteristic of Victorian England. The English class system that you see in Jane Austen, where you can't marry a man because he made his money by trade. And so, a lot of it was the anti-commercial spirit.

Now, starting in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century there was a great effort to uncover biographical documents about Shakespeare. People wanted to know more about him. They were fascinated by him. They wanted to understand him. So there was this great, "We don't have any letters by him. We don't have a diary from him. Surely we can find something that shows he's real." Now the result, again, Shapiro shows this in his book, was forgeries. People started –

KRISTOL: The market works.

CANTOR: Yes, the market works. There's this guy, I think it's William Henry Ireland, who forged a diary by Shakespeare, letters from Shakespeare to the Earl of Southampton and back, forged a manuscript of *King Lear*. "We don't have a manuscript." "Well, I found one." Eventually he forged a play: *Vortigern*, he found a lost play by Shakespeare. Unfortunately he staged it, and the audience broke out in laughter it was so bad; that was the end of that. But there was this desperate effort to find some signs of Shakespeare. And they found them.

And what they found was that Shakespeare, in addition to being a successful commercial playwright, traded in real estate, he loaned money, and was involved in the malt trade. That was big business in Stratford. And he was actually accused of "engrossing" at one point. It gives you an idea of how mercantilist and pre-capitalist Shakespeare's England was. Shakespeare was caught hoarding grain because he thought the price was going to go up. In other words, just the way businessmen behave, normal functioning of the market. He was hoarding grain in case there'd be an emergency. And he'd make a lot of money, but he'd feed people when they didn't have food to eat. Anyway, good businessman, Will.

But they just didn't find what they wanted. They wanted a love letter to Anne Hathaway. They wanted letters to his mistress, whoever she was. They wanted something to show what a sweet guy he was. And all they found were largely documents from law cases, where he's suing some guy for failure to pay debts. And it's pretty clear that he wanted to make money, and he was the most successful playwright of his day.

By the way, one of the charges against him is there's not a single record of his being paid for a play. There's a guy named Philip Henslowe; we discovered his diary. He was a theater manager. And we actually have these markings "five pounds to William Rowley for additions to *Doctor Faustus*." And this is a wonderful document because we can see what people were paid, and how they were brought in, they brought in script doctors, and so on. And there's no such record for Shakespeare.

Well, there's a simple answer to that: Shakespeare was the big one. He was number one. He had, to put it in Hollywood terms, "a percentage of the gross." In Hollywood terms, Shakespeare had points. So he was not paid the normal way for plays, given a fixed fee; he was a shareholder in what was first The Lord Chamberlain's Men, and then The King's Men, part owner of the Globe Theater and so on. And he didn't make his money from simple payments. He got a percentage of the profits.

KRISTOL: And as an actor, too, right?

CANTOR: Yes, he was an actor.

KRISTOL: So he was very much a –

CANTOR: – a man of the theater.

This is actually the greatest moment in my scholarly life; it was a moment when Charlton Heston came to my rescue. And you'll understand this because it's something that happened in *The Weekly Standard*. I was reviewing one of these anti-Shakespeare books by Joe Sobran called *Alias Shakespeare: Solving the Greatest Literary Mystery of All Time*, and I had some fun at Sobran's expense in this essay. It's a long story, but basically I called him a Marxist.

Joe Sobran was a very conservative writer; I knew I could get his goat by calling him a Marxist because he was claiming only an aristocrat could have written these plays, a commoner couldn't have written them. And that's a Marxist class-conscious position. And I got some really nasty letters in response, one from Sobran, one from someone else. But I was amazed when I opened up the May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1997 issue of *The Weekly Standard*, and Charlton Heston has written this long letter in my defense.

KRISTOL: We were amazed to get it at the office. This was pre-email or very early email; this may have actually come in the mail, amazingly enough.

CANTOR: Yeah. It's Charlton Heston, Beverly Hills California. But it's such a marvelous letter, and it's so intelligent and so cultured, I just want to read two paragraphs from it. "Being a writer, Sobran misreads Shakespeare as academics do. He treats him as a writer. I know, there he is on the page. But that's not where he, or his plays, live. Shakespeare leaps alive in air in the spoken sound of his words. Only actors really understand this, though audiences sense it subliminally in performance. When you're redacting the plays in rehearsal, you make the changes in terms of the sound as much as the meaning. That's what Shakespeare did as actor-manager. His plays loom so massively over all the other writing in the world because of his sublime gift, but it was a poet-player's gift; he created those men and women to live on a stage, seen in light and sudden dark, heard in cries and whispers. Exploring them there reveals more than a lifetime in the library can."

And that's so eloquent, and it's so correct. The people have it all wrong. The claim was how could an actor have written these plays? Well, an actor's an awfully good candidate for having written the plays because they show an actor's sense.

And my theory would be Shakespeare's college education was The Globe Theater. Actually, it wasn't The Globe because it wasn't built until later. But Shakespeare lived in a time when apprenticeship was the real model of education. Let's take Leonardo da Vinci, a universal genius, the other candidate for greatest mind of the Renaissance, came from a provincial town curiously called Vinci.

KRISTOL: Where is that?

CANTOR: It's northeast of Florence. And he came to Florence. He didn't go to college

KRISTOL: Now this is earlier than Shakespeare, obviously.

CANTOR: Yeah. Yeah, it is. But here's another genius, one of the greatest painters of all time. And how did he study painting? He didn't go to the Fine Arts department of the University of Rome; he went to Verrocchio, and he learned painting in the studio of Verrocchio. There are some paintings where Verrocchio painted part of it, da Vinci painted the other part. And in general, when you go to the Italian Renaissance painters, they were all sons of middle-class businessmen, of artisans, frequently of goldsmiths.

Again, Shakespeare was the son of a glovemaker. For that matter, Marlowe was the son of a shoemaker, and Ben Jonson was the son of a bricklayer. They all came out of these middle-class backgrounds of artisanship. And we now think of literature as romantic self-expression. Again, now the idea of expression of identity. Shakespeare lived in a world of craftsmanship. Literature was craftsmanship. Painting was craftsmanship. Sculpture was craftsmanship. How did you learn to be a sculptor? Like Michelangelo, you went to a sculptor and learned the craft.

So as far as we can see, Shakespeare came to London, he saw that the theater was the fast lane for success, he became an actor and worked his way up in this theater company. And all the time he was learning by doing. London, at that time, was the greatest school of drama in the world.

And again, in some ways his dramas are not poetry, they are dramas. And his great skill is dramatic; it's in the constructing of plots. When you look at his earliest plays, *Comedy of Errors*, the *Henry VI* plays, they were already extremely dramatic. The poetry is not as good as in the later plays. It takes him a while to learn that. But he knows what's a dramatic scene, and that's because he was observing Thomas Kyd, and Robert Greene, and Christopher Marlowe. And that was the best way he could learn to do it, by apprenticing himself.

And Shapiro brings up this point that's very relevant to the authorship question: namely the collaborative nature of plays in Shakespeare's day. The theories of Bacon or Oxford, they all assume that the way you write a play is go off into a study somewhere and write this perfect play in isolation.

KRISTOL: The solitary artist genius.

CANTOR: The solitary artist who then hands it over to Shakespeare who kind of makes it popular with a few dirty jokes and so on.

Now, in recent decades, increasingly people have come to recognize the collaborative nature of Shakespeare's art. And here it's interesting. It's his earliest and his latest plays that are collaborative. The bulk of his career, he was unusual among Elizabethan, Jacobean playwrights, in that he could write great plays all by himself. Marlowe, for example, was a great tragic writer, but evidently not good at comedy, and we think that the theater companies brought in someone, the guy I mentioned, William Rowley, who wrote the comic scenes in *Doctor Faustus*, which do seem to be on a lower level than the tragic scenes.

Shakespeare could write comedy and tragedy. He's actually very unusual in the history of drama in that respect, although one of his contemporaries, Thomas Middleton, was equally good at comedy and tragedy. But it does seem at the beginning of his career, Shakespeare had to work his way in; he couldn't show up and say, "I'm William Shakespeare, the greatest playwright ever." He had to prove himself, so it does look that for example, *Titus Andronicus*, most people now think it's a collaboration with Robert Greene. Most recently, people were claiming that one of the parts of *Henry VI* was written along with Marlowe – and these are based on stylistic grounds and other considerations. It does look like early in his career he worked with other playwrights.

Now how does that fit the Earl of Oxford theory? How does it fit the Francis Bacon theory? The whole premise of those theories is these guys were keeping themselves aloof. The theory is that an aristocrat would be ashamed to be writing for the commercial theater, and therefore concealed his authorship by passing it off on Shakespeare. But how could he conceal his authorship if he was collaborating with another author?

Now, similarly, at the end of his career, Shakespeare started some more collaborations. *Pericles* was written with a man named George Wilkins, who undoubtedly wrote the first two acts of the play. And above all, Shakespeare started working with John Fletcher, and he coauthored *Henry VIII*, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, and the lost play, *Cardenio*. There is a lost play by Shakespeare. We have overwhelming records that he wrote a play called *Cardenio* with John Fletcher, and it was taken from Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, so we have lost –

KRISTOL: That's terrible.

CANTOR: It's really a shame.

KRISTOL: It seems like something from Borges, or something –

CANTOR: Yes, indeed.

KRISTOL: – that it wouldn't actually really be a lost play, it would be a sort of "fake" lost play.

CANTOR: Yeah. But it's very complicated; some guy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century claimed to have a manuscript of it, and rewrote it and so we have a play called *The Double Falsehood* by Lewis Theobald, which claims to be an adaptation of it.

In any case, what seems to be happening there is Shakespeare is training his successor and building up his reputation. One puzzle about William Shakespeare's life is he appears to stop writing around 1610,

1611, and he doesn't die until 1616. My own theory, and some people share this, is that he did deliberately retire from the stage in order to prepare a complete edition of his plays.

None of his plays were ever published with his supervision; it's a great problem with Shakespeare texts that he did not proofread them, or even supervise them. I believe he decided he was going to prepare an edition, but unfortunately died at the age of 52 before completing the task. I think when you look at the plays, several of them, *The Tempest*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, have such beautiful, neat and perfect texts that I think Shakespeare had succeeded in preparing those. They were among the last plays he wrote, as if he was working back from what he'd written most recently. Again, unfortunately- KRISTOL: And those texts are published in the edition that comes out after his death?

CANTOR: In the folio, yes. And by the way, another frequent argument is that Shakespeare's death went unrecognized in 1616. And it took seven years for his friends to bring out the first folio. It would take editors 40 years today to bring out that edition. And it's clear it was recognition of his genius that his friends – by the way, there were 18 plays that we would have not otherwise have, if it weren't for the first folio.

KRISTOL: Is that right? We don't have the – ?

CANTOR: The quartos, no.

KRISTOL: Wow.

CANTOR: We wouldn't have *Julius Caesar*, we wouldn't have *Othello* [a mistake; *Othello* does exist in quarto form].

KRISTOL: So his friends go to all the trouble of producing this, so to speak, authoritative compilation of plays.

CANTOR: Yes, and in which they did, what looks to us primitive now, but some form of editing. And again, I think they had the papers, and I think Shakespeare had made arrangements with them. And a folio was an incredibly expensive volume; it would cost an ordinary person more than a year's wages to buy that folio. And in fact, fortunately Ben Jonson had prepared a folio edition of his plays in 1616, and called them "works", which shocked people because plays were not supposed to be works, *opera*; they were not supposed to be fancy literary works. They were viewed the way we would regard a TV script now. And fortunately Ben Jonson prepared the way for accepting the idea of a folio edition of Shakespeare's plays.

Again, it shows you how narrow-minded, and again, in a sense anachronistic, this notion that there was no recognition of his death. The first folio is the great monument to Shakespeare, and it was presented as such in the first folio. And Ben Jonson wrote this great encomium to Shakespeare there.

Anyway, this is what I keep saying, that people are reading Shakespeare as if he were a modern author. For example, there's a continuous complaint that he didn't leave the copyright of his works to his family in his will. There was no authorial copyright until well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England. There was publishing copyright. The publisher held the copyrights. And in Shakespeare's case, his theater company owned the plays. He worked for this theater company, again, as a stockholder in it. But that was the great thing it meant to have Shakespeare writing for you, that you would have the exclusive use of his plays. So he did not own any copyrights he could pass on.

So, we have all these theories that the person who wrote these plays can't have been a man of the theater. And that's so completely wrong, that again and again what you see about Shakespeare is that he was a man of the theater.

So that, for example, in this case of John Fletcher, Shakespeare's theater company decided to open up a private theater. They had been performing in The Globe since around 1599, 1600, but they got a chance to lease a theater called The Blackfriars. It was an indoor theater. Their plan was to cater to a smaller audience. I think The Blackfriars sat about 600 people, whereas The Globe could take 2,500 or 3,000, but they were going to charge six times as much for a ticket. And of course they could perform in the winter since it was an indoors theater. If you wanted to see what it looked like, in Staunton Virginia, there's a marvelous replica of it which has a local theater company that performs Shakespeare there, and you can see what it was like to perform in the Blackfriars.

But it's very interesting that this was going to be a big move for the theatre. Now they going to continue to perform in The Globe during the summers. But still this was a big deal, and there were all these signs that they prepared for it. And one of the things they did was they knew they needed new playwrights. A lot of the famous playwrights had died at this point. Shakespeare was getting old. And so they seemed to have lit upon this guy, John Fletcher.

And they were right, because he eventually teamed up with a guy named Francis Beaumont, whom they also brought in, and Beaumont and Fletcher were the Gilbert and Sullivan of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their plays became more popular than Shakespeare's in the 1610s, '20s, '30s, right up to the Puritans shutting down the theater. And at the time of the Restoration in 1660, Shakespeare's plays were revived. But Beaumont and Fletcher's plays were revived.

So Shakespeare and his company knew something; they knew that this was the next Shakespeare. Now, in larger terms, he was not, but he was a very successful playwright, again, especially after he teamed up with Francis Beaumont. And they hit upon a new kind of play that aristocratic audiences would like; they're called tragicomedies. They're stories that have all this tragic material, but they have a turn towards a comic ending.

KRISTOL: Something Shakespeare anticipated though.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: Shakespeare's comedies are often that way, right?

CANTOR: Yes. And then he wrote a number of tragicomedies along with Fletcher, including *Two Noble Kinsmen*. And it does seem that Shakespeare changed his style, and he definitely changes his style, I read you a passage from *The Winter's Tale*, which is a good example of a late Shakespeare play, a tragicomedy, and the style becomes incredibly baroque, much harder to follow, and yet audiences evidently could follow. He changes his style, and he changes the very substances of his plays. He moves from tragedy to tragicomedy.

And again, this is something that the Earl of Oxford or Francis Bacon would have known nothing about. It's something that grows out of the theater world itself where Shakespeare is anticipating trends, working with the youngest playwrights to keep The King's Men going.

By the way, he shows knowledge of the individual actors who were in this company. And there's a marvelous touch, this, that Shapiro points out, that in some of Shakespeare's plays as they're published in his day, in these quartos, he sometimes puts the actor's name instead of the character's name. He knows that Will Kemp is playing Dogberry, or he knows that Will Kemp is playing Lancelot Gobbo, and when he's writing it out he puts "Kemp" instead of Gobbo or Dogberry.

We don't know this for sure because we don't have the manuscripts, but in many cases, these quartos were published from manuscripts. There are certain signs that tell us whether they come from manuscripts, or prompt books, or whether they've been, as we say, "memorially reconstructed" by people who just heard the plays.

Now you don't know this if you read a modern edition. Most people don't realize how reconstructed any modern edition of Shakespeare is. They've all been edited. No two are the same. Try it sometimes, compare. Editors make different decisions. And so, no one's going to leave "Will Kemp" in the margin for the character in a modern edition; they put in Dogberry, or they put in Gobbo, or Falstaff.

But again, these are signs that Shakespeare was working with the actors themselves. And all the evidence points to the fact that the person that wrote these plays was an active part of the theater world. And that's why it's very unlikely it's Francis Bacon.

Again it's amazing to see the contempt people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century have for actors. It's a kind of political correctness. Because even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as they did in Shakespeare's day, actors had a bad reputation. They were suspect, and so, "how could an actor have written these plays?" As Charlton Heston, an actor, points out, it's *precisely* an actor who would have written these plays.

And we have many examples of actor-playwrights, Moliere in France would be another great example. You just have to look at Sam Shepherd in our day, Wallace Shawn. So many people who are actors go on to become playwrights or vice versa.

KRISTOL: Let's close by saying a word – it's very interesting – I think you mentioned, political correctness, Victorian political correctness. Now we have identity politics political correctness. That's really, ultimately, in a funny way what's behind the attempt to deny that Shakespeare is Shakespeare.

CANTOR: Yes. In different periods, we have different forms of orthodoxy, or political correctness, and we have a certain model of what an author should be, and Shakespeare doesn't fit that model.

KRISTOL: And he's so great, I suppose, that if you have that model – that if he exists independent of or contrary to that orthodoxy, it's a problem for the orthodoxy. If he can understand women as well as anyone has understood women, and isn't a woman, that's a problem for a certain kind of feminism. If he can understand aristocrats, that's a problem for a certain kind of Victorian. I guess that's why they're so intent on Shakespeare as opposed to other people.

CANTOR: Yeah. I think that's a good point. Shakespeare is the greatest author who ever lived, certainly the greatest playwright, and so much greater than anybody else, that he's a real challenge. And it is miraculous that any one person could have written these plays. I like to say that if you create a list of the 20 greatest works of literature, Shakespeare wrote about ten of them.

KRISTOL: And the range, and the English history, and Rome, and comedy and tragedy.

CANTOR: Yeah. It's extraordinary, and it simply, simply cannot be explained. The joke of all this is people think they could explain it. If it could just be a guy who went to college, then he could have written the plays. Well...a lot of people went to college, they can't write Shakespeare. If he could just be an aristocrat, he could have written the plays. But in fact, there's no way to explain it. It's just one of the great miracles.

And again, the Renaissance produced Rafael, Leonardo, and Michelangelo, and they're not explainable either. And so, it is the miracle of human genius.

But in Shakespeare's case, it is the real challenge that he just breaks all the categories. Jonson famously said, in that prefatory poem to the first folio that he was, "not of an age, but for all time." And here we are, still reading him.

And it is miraculous. We talked about this when we were talking about canon formation in popular culture. Dante is incredibly great, Milton is incredibly great. But they're not read the way Shakespeare is, or performed – well they didn't write plays. But Dante, I guess, in Italy people still read him, but I don't think common people respond to Dante, and they certainly don't to John Milton. And there's so many cases like that.

Shakespeare transcends all the categories in this sense that he also is still popular, still the most popular playwright in the world. And that's incredibly frustrating. A lot of the people that challenge him, like Mark Twain, for example, wrote a whole book called *Is Shakespeare Dead?*, trying to prove that Shakespeare was Bacon. They're just jealous. They're just envious of Shakespeare.

But this point with critics is, yeah, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century you just have to look at someone like Matthew Arnold, who is a critic. He has such a middle-class view of the "moral uprightness" of literature, and so how could this guy from Stratford have written these plays that after all deal with adultery so much, and all sorts of forms of criminality? But by the way, Shakespeare should have been a criminal if he created Iago and other characters like that.

So they want to remake Shakespeare in their Victorian image. And now in our day Shakespeare not only has to be a feminist but he has to be a woman because that's what they think is the epitome of human virtue. And just a refusal to accept the fact that he was able to do what he did because he simply was a genius and beyond categories.

Now I do think he was relatively learned, and I increasingly think he read Aristotle, for example. Certainly he had read Machiavelli. And by the way, it's interesting. In some ways, I have no problem if someone other than William Shakespeare wrote these plays. I don't do biographical criticism; I'm interested in what the plays express.

I *would* have a problem with Bacon. Because Bacon's philosophy is the absolute opposite of Shakespeare. To put it in simple terms, I believe Shakespeare was an ancient, and Bacon was a modern. And you see it on the issue of Machiavelli, that Bacon was a deep Machiavellian, and Shakespeare, though he had read Machiavelli and understood Machiavelli, he's ultimately anti-Machiavellian. And you can see that in the contrast of his *Richard III* and his *Henry V*, where Richard III is a pure Machiavellian and must be destroyed. Henry V is very Machiavellian but ultimately knows to conceal that. And you could say he's the ultimate Machiavellian. But he does understand that you cannot simply pursue Machiavelli's lowminded view of human nature.

Anyway, we could talk forever about this stuff that's actually in Shakespeare's plays. But I find it amusing that, with all due respect to Delia Bacon, that she thought that Bacon had written these plays. Aside from the fact that he was so busy. He was writing volumes upon volumes of philosophy, and history, and he was also solicitor general, attorney general, and a very active political career.

So that's the interesting thing. There's something mysterious about Shakespeare in terms of his own greatness, and so people come forward with these alternatives. And yet, they are far more problematic. In the case of – the Earl of Oxford died in 1604. We can date Shakespeare's plays to 1610 or '11, and based on contemporary references. For example, *Macbeth* has references to the Gun Powder Plot in 1605. How did the Earl of Oxford know the Gun Powder Plot? People say, "Well, he left these plays with instructions to add contemporary references to make him seem current."

In all cases with these alternatives – and again, Bacon and Oxford are the most popular of the candidates – they require a lot more explanation than admitting that Shakespeare wrote them. They're constantly having to build up the equivalent of epicycles in astronomy to keep their theory going. And at some point, you've just got to say, "No, Shakespeare wrote these plays."

KRISTOL: It turns out it's harder to accept true genius and human excellence than to invent all these workarounds, so to speak.

CANTOR: Yes. Yes, that's a good way of putting it.

KRISTOL: This has been a fascinating conversation. And I hope we've saved Shakespeare for Shakespeare, and now we can go back to having more conversations about Shakespeare. And I'm looking forward to that. I'm very interested in the tragedy/comedy question because the Shakespearian

comedies are so close to being tragedies. And you can really see even some parallels in some cases between a tragedy and a comedy that he wrote. And he shows you how easily a comic scene could have been tragedy.

CANTOR: *Merchant of Venice* is a good example of that. We could do an interesting conversation on the comedies.

KRISTOL: But we'll discuss them with the presumption that Shakespeare was Shakespeare.

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: Paul Cantor, thank you for joining me today. And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]