

## Conversations with Bill Kristol

**Guest:** Paul Cantor

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### **I. Comedy and Skepticism (0:15 – 13:05)**

KRISTOL: Hi, welcome back to CONVERSATIONS. I'm Bill Kristol, very pleased to be joined again by my friend Paul Cantor, Professor of Literature at the University of Virginia. He has been a guest on many conversations ranging in topics from Shakespeare to popular culture, to fiction, to Westerns in movies and novels. But today, we're going to talk about Shakespeare and comedy.

Before we get into that, I should say that you can watch a whole series of lectures by Paul, excellent lectures on Shakespeare, at the Shakespeare and Politics page of Great Thinkers, [www.thegreatthinkers.org](http://www.thegreatthinkers.org). So, go to [www.thegreatthinkers.org](http://www.thegreatthinkers.org), click on Shakespeare and politics, and you'll get a very well curated page with Paul's lectures and actually, the earlier conversations we've had on Shakespeare, et cetera. But enough of the promotion, let's get to the topic, so Paul, thanks for being with me.

CANTOR: Pleasure being here. I know it's virtual.

KRISTOL: Yeah. I know, next time. Next time in —

CANTOR: Yeah, I think so.

KRISTOL: Next time in reality, but. So, Shakespeare and comedy. So you wanted to talk about comedy? With most people interested in Shakespeare, the tragedies come to mind first, and they're more serious and heavy and weighty and all that. I assume you have a slightly different view if you want to discuss comedy here.

CANTOR: Yeah, I think comedy doesn't get enough attention. And I recognize that Shakespeare's tragedies are his great plays. I'd say that *King Lear* and *Hamlet* are his two greatest works, but I think we

tend to underestimate the comedies, because we don't understand paradoxically, their seriousness. And there is a way in which the comedies take up subjects seriously in a way that maybe the tragedies don't. And so, I've always felt that the comedies tend to be neglected or discussed in superficial ways. It's well-known that you can't explain humor. There's nothing worse than trying to analyze a joke.

And so, I think it's pretty clear that the scholarship on the tragedies is more interesting than that on the comedies. But I do think that there's something to be learned from the comedies that we can't learn from the tragedies. And here, I take my clue from Leo Strauss. I'm going to just —

KRISTOL: Also the subject of several conversations in this series. [crosstalk] than others, but anyway, go ahead.

CANTOR: That is, I'm one of the few literary critics, who has taken Strauss as a literary critic seriously. And I found that he has many profound comments about comedy. As always, with Strauss, they're somewhat enigmatic, but I've tried to learn from them. But I will say my whole attitude toward Shakespearean comedy was altered when I was reading Strauss's book, *The City and Man* when it first came out, and I was enrolled in a course with Harvey Mansfield at that time, I recall. I was trying to learn how to read literature based on the way Strauss read philosophy. In any case, in his essay on Plato's *Republic*, he's talking about the *Republic* and comparing it to a work by Thomas More. He writes, "The relation of weeping and laughing is similar to that of tragedy and comedy. We may therefore say that the Socratic conversation, and hence the Platonic dialogue, is slightly more akin to comedy than to tragedy. And this kinship is noticeable also in Plato's *Republic*, which is manifestly akin to Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen*."

That sentence really shocked me--that "the Platonic dialogue is slightly more akin to comedy than to tragedy." In a way, Strauss is saying that comedy is more philosophic than tragedy. And it's taken me a long time to understand that sentence, as often happens with sentences from Leo Strauss, but I now agree with it. And what I gradually came to understand is that comedy is skeptical. Comedy raises doubts about things. You can even go right to Aristotle on the discussion of tragedy and comedy in the *Poetics*, where Aristotle says tragedy presents men better than they are and comedy presents men worse than they are. And in a way, Aristotle is pointing to the same idea. You could put it this way: that tragedy takes the heroes of the city seriously. It looks up to them, it presents them as heroic. It shows them as problematic, because after all their outcome was tragic, but they are still heroic in their tragedies and in that sense, admirable. And you can see it in the way people do admire the great heroes of tragedy.

Whereas comedy, and Aristotle says this, "It reveals the laughable and it makes us laugh at people." Aristotle's account is that tragedy arises from the encomia, the hymns of praise that people used to write to heroes, and comedy arises from lampoons, from satires of people. And that satiric spirit of comedy means that it cuts people down a peg or two. It, for example, shows that the heroes of cities have feet of clay. And so, in that, that's the way I think Strauss means that comedy is more philosophical. That tragedy, in a way, accepts the beliefs of the city. It, for example, accepts the gods because violating divine statutes is what gets you in trouble in a tragedy. Whereas comedy really laughs at everything in the city including its heroes and even its gods.

Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds* is a great example of that when you realize that even comedies were presented in a kind of religious festival in Athens. It's just astounding that *The Birds* was produced at a religious festival. It makes fun of heroes like Hercules—it shows him to be a real dumb dolt and even the gods are shown as weak. They're starved into submission by the birds when the birds decide to interdict sacrifices going up to the gods. They starve the gods into submission by preventing the sacrifices from rising from the earth into the heavens. It's just an astounding play when you think of it that way.

And in a sense, Strauss's point is that comedy is more subversive than tragedy. Tragedy in a way stands behind the city and its heroes or its gods and its way of life and it deals with the heroic and it suggests these heroic figures are genuinely heroic. Whereas Aristophanes presents them as boasters, as men who only pretend to be heroic, and who turn out indeed to be perfectly ordinary. And once I realized that,

I said, well, there's something to be said for philosophy being closer to comedy, because comedy shares the philosophical doubt, the doubt that's at the basis of philosophy.

KRISTOL: I suppose Strauss did indeed what he says in the speech, in the sense that he wrote a book *Socrates and Aristophanes*. I think it's the only long treatment of his, really long and sustained of, let's call it, a poet or a playwright, I suppose. I mean, he deals with them in passing at other times, and he knew quite a lot actually about a lot of them, it seems like he had studied them. But so, there's a kind of kinship of Socrates and Aristophanes that perhaps there wouldn't be of Socrates and the tragic poets, and so of Plato and Aristophanes, therefore, presumably. So, yeah, but I guess comedy is both more philosophic than tragedy and philosophy maybe is more comic than tragic, right? I mean, that's —

CANTOR: Ultimately, the —

KRISTOL: Which is a contrarian point because everyone, the normal account of Socrates is the *Apology*, the tragedy he is killed by the city and somehow that's not the deepest side, maybe.

CANTOR: Well, Plato turns that Socratic tragedy into a comedy, because it ends happily, because Socrates on the basis of philosophy says, "I don't fear death. If the accounts of it are true, and I'm going to meet up with the great poets in the afterlife, then it's fine. If not, it's just, I'll be asleep." So it really is a point that a number of people have noted independent of Strauss, that's — and by the way, that passage I read is right after an account from Thomas More saying that, "We have examples of Jesus weeping, but we have no examples of him laughing. Whereas of Socrates, we have no examples of him weeping and all the examples we have of him have him laughing." And so —

KRISTOL: That is so interesting. Yeah. Isn't that amazing?

CANTOR: Yeah.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Anyway, Strauss discussed Aristophanes, but not Shakespeare much. And so, he left it to you to do Shakespeare's comedies, that was nice. That was nice of him to leave you some work to do there.

CANTOR: Yes, I have to say that when Strauss comments on Shakespeare, it's all, it's pretty much right on and showed us that he knew what he was doing there. But I was thrilled when the Aristophanes book came out and indeed, I may read some passages from it, because it has even more interesting passages scattered in it about comedy.

And indeed, I do think that Shakespearean comedy is different from Aristophanic comedy. In a way, it seems less serious at first. Aristophanic comedy, it was one of those called Old Comedy among the ancient Greeks and it dealt with politics. And you see so many of Aristophanes' plays are making fun of the Athenian politicians, Creon, for example. And on the surface of it, Aristophanic comedy seems to deal with more serious issues.

What replaced Aristophanes, among the ancient Greeks, was what was called New Comedy. The chief representative of that is Menander. We have a slight problem with Menander that only one of his plays has survived whole and a substantial fragment of another one. But Menander's comedy is already recognizably Shakespeare's comedy. Shakespeare did write New Comedy, and that is, Menander's comedy was about young lovers and how they got in trouble with their parents, and how their parents tried to prevent them from getting married, and then how they with help of a wily slave, they outwitted their parents.

Now, Greek New Comedy became Roman comedy, chiefly, Plautus and Terence. And that's where Shakespeare inherited his tradition of comedy from. There were some English comedies he worked from. Shakespeare: evidently his first play and his first comedy was *The Comedy of Errors*. And that's based on a play by Plautus. So, it's not clear that Shakespeare ever saw, ever read a Greek tragedy or comedy.

KRISTOL: That's interesting, yeah.

CANTOR: They were barely available in Greek at that point and that was in Italy. There's just the fewest signs. The phrase "when the hurly-burly's done" in *Macbeth*. "Hurly-burly" is used in the first English translation of Seneca's *Agamemnon*. I think that's the only smoking gun we've got that Shakespeare had ever seen even a Roman tragedy. Anyway, but Shakespeare's comedy deals with romance, though romance —

## II: Shakespeare's Comedy (13:05– 46:32)

KRISTOL: So, let's talk about what — I mean, let's give people some help here. Which comedies, would you say are, I don't know, bring out your points most easily or clearly in Shakespeare's work?

CANTOR: Okay. I should say, I checked this, every one of Shakespeare's comedies deals with romantic love. So it was a subject of great interest to him. And let me talk about that first before talking about specific comedies. That is, we're talking about comedy as a corrective. That people have illusions. They overestimate things and so, the comic poet comes in to correct that. And I think of all Shakespeare's comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing* is the most aptly titled. Sounds like the Seinfeld of the Renaissance: "the play about nothing." But in a way, that is the formula for Shakespearean comedy: much ado about nothing.

He looks around the world and he sees people taking stuff really, really seriously. And his answer is, "That's a mistake. That you're taking something seriously, that does not deserve to be taken seriously. You're making much ado about nothing." And as that play shows, and as all the comedies do, Shakespeare believed that people were taking love too seriously. Now this sounds odd for one of the great love poets of all time.

And indeed, *Romeo and Juliet* could help us understand this. *Romeo and Juliet* easily could have become a Menander type comedy. It is a play with young lovers trying to outwit parents and, as people point out: well into the third act, up to the point when Mercutio is killed, *Romeo and Juliet* could still have a comic ending. But Shakespeare does give the story a tragic ending and he's raising doubts about the kind of love that is represented by *Romeo and Juliet*.

His problem with that kind of love is it's suicidal and it's not accidentally suicidal, as Shakespeare presents it. Yeah, a lot of things happen. There are misplaced letters. All sorts of people show up a minute too late to the tomb and so on. But the problem with these two kids, according to Shakespeare, is they want to die for each other. They have a conception of love, in which you only prove the depth of your love, or you only prove your love is infinite, by making the ultimate and infinite sacrifice for the love, namely, "I would die for you." And indeed Shakespeare brilliantly contrives the plot, so that Romeo gets to commit suicide thinking Juliet's dead. And then when she revives and sees he's dead, she commits suicide.

And the problem is, suicide is too easily triggered when your conception of love is that it's something infinite. And how can we measure the infinite? only with the whole of your life. And I think Shakespeare was trying to show in that play the tragedy of this conception of love. We'll talk about its nature in a minute, but it was the prevalent conception of love in all the poetry and literature of the Renaissance. And it's so self-destructive. That it's like these kids, their attitude is just, "Give me any excuse to kill myself, because I've got something to prove. I want to prove —"

KRISTOL: It does seem also that if you think of the comedies, in addition to the critique of love, which we'll get back to in a minute, in that tradition, *The Comedy of Errors* is a funny title, obviously, in a way. And they all seem to be — there are a lot of errors in these comedies. People make stupid mistakes, they misinterpret what other people are saying, they get misled by others, by either their fellow lover or by their parents, or their parents make a mistake about the kids. And it's — a lot of the working out of the plots has to do with overcoming these errors that people somehow make.

CANTOR: But Shakespeare's point is it seems always accidental, and to be the product of certain errors. But not everybody automatically reacts to seeing the corpse of a beloved, by killing yourself. What Shakespeare is showing —

KRISTOL: Life is full of errors, but you don't need to go, yeah, perish.

CANTOR: Yeah, yeah. It's like they're looking for disaster. And that's the whole tradition of love poetry that he had inherited, going all the way back to the Italians, as we'll see. But that's his point, that I think he observed that there was a kind of death wish in this notion of an infinite love. And again, you see it so perfectly in *Romeo and Juliet*. I mean, Romeo was ready to kill himself over Rosaline at the beginning of the play. It's like he's looking for something to die for, as happens so often in these plays.

And I think Shakespeare realized that tragedy may not be the best way to deal with the danger of this kind of love because the sad thing is young lovers see *Romeo and Juliet*, and this is true to this day, and they want to be like Romeo and Juliet. That's what love is. "Oh, he was willing to die for her. Oh, she was willing to die for him." They see what's heroic about it. They don't see what's stupid about it. And many characters in the play, most famously the nurse, Juliet's nurse, do see what's so stupid about this what it looks like. Romeo has been banished. Juliet's nurse says, "Well, why not marry the County Paris? He's fine, He's good looking." And no, no, she can't do that. As we'll talk about tragedies, the world would accept no substitutes. There's only one man for you in the whole world.

So anyway, it is funny that I think Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* as a cautionary tale about this kind of love. And look, it has survived to this day as the great banner for this infinite romantic love and to this day, it's seductive that young people see it. They want to be like Romeo and Juliet. They don't come away saying, "Gee, we really should listen to our parents. It's a much more practical thing to do."

KRISTOL: Or don't trust some Friar who tells you he has everything worked out, right?

CANTOR: Absolutely. But I think Shakespeare realized that comedy would be a better weapon against this notion of love, that what it needs is to be ridiculed. And this is Shakespeare's point, this is really a stupid approach to life to think that what should be the guiding principle in your life is death, that it should be death devoted. And you know this from Wagner in *Tristan and Isolde*, the whole German tradition in romanticism, the death devotion of the romantic lovers, that goes all the way back to Petrarch, as I'll talk about in a minute, to Dante.

And Shakespeare thought, "We got to make fun of this. We got to show it's laughable." And indeed, it would be in the tradition, broadly speaking, of Aristophanic comedy in this sense, he would show that these lovers had pretensions. They actually think they're heroes. They think there's something heroic about something that, when all is said and done, is hormones. It's much ado about nothing.

Now, the title of *Much Ado About Nothing* is actually very clever. "Nothing" was Elizabethan slang for the female organ. The idea is that men have a thing and women have nothing between their legs. Now, don't blame me for this. This is Elizabethan slang here. I'm not endorsing it, but it's really funny, because what *Much Ado About Nothing* means is much ado about sex. Much ado about the female organ. And in a way, Shakespeare's view of romantic love is that it presents itself as so spiritual and leading to the infinite, but really, it's just sex. And it's what he's trying to remind us of in his romantic comedies that what gets turned into this ultimate spirituality really is a product of the body, of hormones, sexual desire. I mean, of course, it's a perfect choice for comedy.

There's nothing that brings out the silliness and stupidity of human beings more than love. I mean, let's face it, the stupidest things people do in their lives are because of love. Now, I know it's wonderful. Love, the emotion is the basis of our civilization and all of that. But let's face it, it also leads people to do incredibly stupid things and that look stupid to anyone who's not in the grip of the hormones. And I think one of the great themes of Shakespearean comedy, and it is romantic comedy, is the disproportion between the emotions the two lovers feel, and anything that the outside observers think about it. And that's often the texture of these romantic comedies.

And again, you see it at the beginning in *Romeo and Juliet* with Romeo explaining to the Friar how wonderful Rosaline is, and then he has to come back two scenes later, now saying how wonderful Juliet is and the Friar said, "Wait, didn't you say that about Rosaline?" Shakespeare is very good at setting up—it's very dramatic, this disproportion between what the lovers feel and what any normal person in the society feels looking at this. So, I think Shakespeare had the sense that what this view of love needed was ridicule.

KRISTOL: But after the debunking, I mean, which a lot of people could do after all, just be cynical and say, "This is ludicrous." And other people have said this throughout history. There's also these plots that tend to result in sort of happy endings or seemingly happy endings —

CANTOR: Absolutely.

KRISTOL: — and marriages and so forth. So, I mean, he wants to also not simply debunk, right? I mean.

CANTOR: Yes, this is the great enterprise of Shakespeare's romantic comedies to distinguish what is natural in love from what is conventional. And this is another way in which I think Strauss understood comedy to be more philosophical. That tragedy is often concerned with one convention against another; In *Antigone* the law of the city against the law of the family. They're both conventions. And in a way, that's why tragedy cannot be resolved. But in the case of love, Shakespeare does see an underlying nature here.

The character Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* is so perfect here. He says he's so skeptical about marriage. And then he says at one point, "The world must be peopled." That's the ultimate natural aim of love and Shakespeare understands it. It's generation and we need to regenerate the human race every generation from sex and —

KRISTOL: But then, we also need for the sake of the city and for society, families and sort of structures. And it can't just be —

CANTOR: Yes, yes, yes. And that's —

KRISTOL: It can't just be sex.

CANTOR: And that's really right. And that's the whole point that Shakespeare sees a tremendous disjunction here. And again, I'll have to go back and give you the background on the notions of love in his day. But on the one hand, you would have a notion that love is just sex, that it's just adultery and pleasure, and it has no larger function whatsoever. And then you have this other view, and again, if love were just sex, you wouldn't need marriage. Marriage is for the sake of families.

On the other hand, you have this extreme view, which he would associate with the Italian poet Petrarch where love is so spiritual. It's not a physical thing. It's above generation. You have the idea that love, in fact, is incompatible with marriage. That marriage domesticates love. It turns it into something ordinary and no longer infinite. And that's the thing you see. *Romeo and Juliet* despise their parents' desire to get them well-married, to offer marriage as a way of integrating them into society. In a way, their whole goal in love is to take themselves out of society and to reject their parents, to reject the city of Verona. It's interesting that they are accompanied in this project by a very subversive Catholic priest in that city, Friar Lawrence.

So, Shakespeare's notion was--this is so true of Shakespeare in so many ways--to achieve some kind of happy medium. And his answer was that love's ultimate social function is to produce children through families, and therefore, love must be disciplined by marriage. And so Bill, you're exactly right, that Shakespeare's comedies end with marriage. Now, that obviously is itself a social institution, but more importantly, and you always see this at the end of Shakespearean comedies, that marriage is an integrating institution. It brings together people. It brings together a whole community around the

marriage. And indeed, marriage becomes a fundamental social and socializing institution in Shakespeare's comedies.

So, what he objected to was the notion of love that, again, sees love as infinite; and that means love is not compatible with finite things, like marriage, having a family. Again, you can't picture Romeo and Juliet getting into a station wagon and taking the kids to a PTA meeting on parents' night. That would make them so petty in a way, and no longer heroic. In a way, they seek out death to maintain the infinite purity of their love. They are so death devoted. I mean, they're invoking death in their speeches. And again, this survives all the way into *Tristan and Isolde*.

KRISTOL: It seems to me maybe a religious or Christian inflected kind of love or a particular characteristic, maybe of a Christian age.

CANTOR: Yes. And that's what Shakespeare was dealing with, a notion of love that he and his whole culture had inherited from the Middle Ages. So I wanted to say something about that, because I think that really is the background to all of this.

Now, there are various names for this kind of love. I've been invoking Petrarch, the Italian poet who first wrote sonnets about love. Obviously, it was very important to Shakespeare and the English poets in that sense. But it really goes back, this notion of love to the troubadours in the Middle Ages. It's odd because we're so used to this kind of love that we don't realize it had a very specific origin. And so, within Western culture, we're talking about the late 12th Century in southern France, in the area, we now call Provence. This is often called courtly love, because it's associated with these small courts. Now, there was no "France" in the 12th Century. "France" was a dream of a couple of people living on a little island in the middle of the Seine river there. But you had all these small courts and they each had a poet and that's where we get our concept of a troubadour.

And it celebrated a special kind of love, in which, typically, there would be a knight. These are often stories of knights in shining armor. As we'll see in the story of Lancelot and Guinevere in the King Arthur cycle. It's a perfect example of this. A knight would be in love with a mistress or a lady. He worships her from afar. Very often, he is blocked even from approaching her, because she's the wife of his king. Now again, the Lancelot, Guinevere, King Arthur triangle is an early example of this. Again, I like to bring in Wagner all the time with this. It's also the story of Tristan, Isolde, and King Mark, which is, by the way, a story that has its origins in the Middle Ages as well.

And the key thing to this notion of love is that it involves suffering. That's so distinctive about it. The idea is that it ain't love if you're not suffering. Now, there's a certain truth to that, and we've all suffered the pangs of love and we know how much suffering can be involved in it. But for most of human history, that was regarded as a disadvantage of love. It was the downside of love. In the ancient world, for example, this kind of love was literally regarded as pathological; that it was something to be gotten rid of. It was something to be cured. That unconsummated love, for example, in the ancient pagan world is regarded as one of the nasty experiences in life.

And so you have, for example, the Latin poet Ovid wrote a book of poems called *Remedies of Love*. And indeed, there were all these medical treatises in the ancient world that treated how do you deal with the pain of love. Again, it was thought to be something to be gotten rid of, to be overcome. That's really at the heart of the pagan notion of love, which is that love is sex and it's a good thing, and you indulge in it.

Now, what's really curious and in a way appropriate is that in the high Middle Ages, you develop a conception of love, where what marks the love as special is suffering. And these poets, you got to say indulge themselves and portray the suffering of love. They wallow in the suffering. They create characters who go on and on and on about how painful their love is. And you can see how this is the product of a Christian civilization where, for example, asceticism has become a value in Christianity, that renouncing of pleasure, wearing hair shirts, imposing penances on yourself, these are thought of as goals of Christians.

And what developed was a kind of parallel culture for this courtly love culture, which gave this strange Christian inflection to love where what you wanted to do in love was to suffer for it. So, you sought out an impossible situation: fall in love with a woman that you can't possibly marry. It's very interesting that there's a book by a man we know as Andreas Capellanus that is often called in English *The Art Of Courtly Love*. Its real title is *The Art of Loving Nobly*. And one of the sections, it's actually so funny, it's a medieval treatise, so, it reads a bit like Thomas Aquinas's *Summa*. It poses questions and then answers them. And one of the questions is: "Is love compatible with marriage?" And the answer is a resounding no. And marriage was seen as the ordinary world you wanted to renounce.

And by the way, there's a brilliant and incredibly controversial book on this subject by Denis de Rougemont called in English, *Love in the Western World*. And he associates this development with a gnostic outbreak in Southern France at the same time, the civilization of the so-called Cathars, C-A-T-H-A-R-S, that this was a gnostic community that developed in Provence, again, around the 12th Century. These are the people who were wiped out by the Albigensian crusade and so we're kind of straying into religious mysticism here, but it's very interesting when he shows that the way these troubadour poets address their mistress is just the way the Cathar poets addressed their distant, obscured God. God was seen as unreachable in gnostic fashion.

Anyway, I just mentioned if anyone wants to read some more background on this. It is absolutely fascinating what de Rougemont argues in this book. And again, it shows this was not a mainstream movement, it was seen as heretical. And indeed, the Pope and the King of France got together to wipe out this culture.

KRISTOL: But the tradition of courtly love lives on, I mean, despite this.

CANTOR: Lives on and it is amazing how quickly it conquered Europe. There was no internet then, but within 50 years, this mode of poetry had spread as far as modern Yugoslavia. There were Croatian poets who write in this style. And it is what we recognize to be love poetry. It's these poets, who introduced the language of religion into love. And our love poetry is saturated with the language of religion, the lover and his beloved are trying to get to heaven through their love. If you betray your beloved, you are a heretic.

And indeed, there's a great deal of language of heresy and of conversion, and that surfaces throughout Shakespeare's comedies as well. And we are so used to this, we think it is normal to speak of love as a religious experience. But this is the first time it ever happens anywhere in the world. And again, we can't believe that. You know, "Well, didn't Greek poets talk about love as heaven?" No! Latin poets talk about it as a sickness.

KRISTOL: So, Shakespeare is dealing with this particular phenomenon, but also it's more human. I mean, it still has a sort of grounding in human nature that he's also interested in dealing with it, right?

CANTOR: Well, what's really interesting, what made this popular, and in a certain sense made it great is it introduced a new spiritual dimension, not just into the speaking about love, but into love itself. And I think, it's all very well to idealize the pagan world and pagan sex. It must have been a lot of fun, but it kind of demeaned it as an experience. It made common cause with animals. Pagans can rut just the way animals can.

I think Shakespeare admired, in a sense, what Christian culture had done to civilize love and to give it some larger spiritual dimension. And that's what he does in *Romeo and Juliet*. That's what he does in so many of his love poems. I think he really saw this as a key element in civilizing and something that the Christian Middle Ages had introduced. The love poetry of the Christian Middle Ages is unlike anything before it. And it's what has given us this sense of a deep inner spirituality involved in love. And in this sense, it has become universal, because we now have other cultures around the globe that have adopted this same view of love. And it's a very attractive view. The view is that love has this higher meaning to it and it's associated with chivalry. Chivalry was a very civilizing force. It took something as brutal as warfare and tried to give it a higher dimension.

And so, if there's a complete fusion between the courtly love idea and the chivalry idea, so their ideas of chivalry come from the stories of King Arthur and those stories embody, especially the figures of Lancelot and Guinevere, this higher dimension. So, one of the absolutely key texts in this is a book called *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart* by Chrétien de Troyes. I think this is written around 1180. It's a poem, but it's a narrative poem and it's really the beginning of the Arthurian tradition as we know it. There were stories of Arthur before, but they dealt with warfare and not with love. It's this guy, Chrétien de Troyes, who introduces this new spiritualized notion of love.

And there's this wonderful point when Lancelot basically says to Guinevere, "What can I do for you? How could I prove my love for you?" And she says, "There's a tournament tomorrow, lose. I want you to lose." And Lancelot is the greatest knight. He's undefeated in 57 combats or so, and how could he lose? "If you really love me, you'll lose." And that will show, "You'll suffer for me. You will suffer in a deeper sense. You will sacrifice your arms." And Lancelot goes out the next day, and he loses to everybody. Like he almost loses to his squire. "What's happened to Lancelot?" You know, imagine the TV commentators on that. One upset after another. Lancelot's supposed to be — But there he is, the big loser to prove something to his love and to suffer.

KRISTOL: So, Shakespeare wants to get beyond that, or?

CANTOR: Yes, because there's something potentially —

KRISTOL: While somehow recognizing it, too. That, I mean sort of —

CANTOR: Yeah, yeah, no. And again, he certainly makes it a big point of his plays. No one has ever given a better portrayal of it than Shakespeare does in *Romeo and Juliet*, but he's —

KRISTOL: But could you argue that if you put together *Romeo and Juliet* and *Much Ado*, or if you chose of some of the other plays I'd say as well, you maybe have a way he tries to preserve —

CANTOR: Yes.

KRISTOL: You're not going to get rid of romantic love at this point, maybe you never could have —

CANTOR: Absolutely, yeah. That way, he —

KRISTOL: And you somehow preserve it, but also civilize it, as it were, or tame it or anything like that.

CANTOR: That's very Hegelian: we have to *aufheben* it. We have to destroy it and preserve it, and lift it to a higher level if you know what "*aufheben*" means in Hegel. But indeed, ultimately, Shakespeare's goal is to retain the spirituality, but get rid of this otherworldliness of it, which makes it so self-defeating. That just to heighten the stakes here, this movement begins in France, but Southern France is very close to Northwest Italy. And so, it makes it and of course, there's no France, there's no Italy, there's no border at that time.

So, this very quickly gets into Italy, and leads to a man named Dante. And as Dante says, his teachers were the troubadours. In fact, in *The Divine Comedy*, there's one passage that is in Provençal, not in French, not in Italian, but in that weird language Provençal, which they still speak in places like Toulouse in France, this language that's in between French and Italian. He incorporates one as a tribute to the troubadour poets, he includes a passage in Provençal, in *The Divine Comedy*. And of course, what Dante does is to lift this to a whole other level of spirituality. First in his love poems, a cycle called *La Vita Nuova*, *The New Life*. Dante is the first to write sonnets in our sense of sonnets, love sonnets.

And then, of course, it culminates in the figure of Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*, who leads Dante, ultimately to paradise and becomes his spiritual guide in paradise. And in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, there is a woman named Beatrice.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Let's talk — I've always wondered about that. I take it that's not an accident, as we say?

CANTOR: No. And she's paired with a man named Benedict, who would be St. Benedict, the founder of monastic orders. I think that that's one of the things that's going on in *Much Ado About Nothing*. It's examining, if you will, the spiritual heritage of poetry. And so, Shakespeare was very suspicious of this heritage. It becomes the heritage of losers, and self-defeatist. And is suicidal in the sense that it is based on a notion of this world being thoroughly corrupt and incapable of satisfying spiritual desires, and leading people into another world. This is where De Rougemont is so interesting, because he uncovers the gnostic roots of this, the Gnosticism, the most otherworldly form of Christianity.

KRISTOL: Right, so the extreme form of it, yeah.

CANTOR: Yeah, yeah. And in a way, and Shakespeare would not have used this vocabulary, but I think his point was, this view of love is gnostic. It's based on a thoroughgoing devaluation of this world, hence, no interest in families or children, no interest in prolonging life in this world. And for Shakespeare, that's the ultimate natural goal of love. It's nice that it's spiritualized and it can be spiritualized through marriage. And that's how to integrate this natural function into a social function. But he's very suspicious of this view of love, which again, is mystifyingly attractive.

### III: Love and Friendship (46:32 – 1:23:40)

KRISTOL: Right. But he seems like he also — I mean, I guess one could really go through the different comedies. I've never really thought of this before, and find different ways in which he shows you how you could resolve, work out the pairings and the matchings of lovers from the point of view of what's good for them, but also what's good for the city and for the public order. And they all have this reshuffling at the end and people get married off.

And I think some of the critics, I have always been struck by this — so say a word about this — some of the critics don't like some of the endings because people kind of get matched up in ways that seem a little unfair sometimes to one or the other. Right? I mean, they kind of — *Measure for Measure*, for example. Some good people get stuck with some guy who was a creep just an act before, and didn't show much love for her even in the same act, sometimes in Act 5. And I guess that's Shakespeare saying, "You're not always going to have the perfect match here —

CANTOR: Exactly.

KRISTOL: But from your point of view, and I guess the city's point of view, we need to kind of make some accommodations, right? And —

CANTOR: Exactly. Now, that's the spirit of Shakespearean comedy is "make some accommodations." The spirit of Shakespearean tragedy is "no accommodations." And once you can realize that, you realize what's going on here. *Midsummer Night's Dream* is a perfect example of this. That you have these four lovers: Hermia and Helena and Demetrius and Lysander and don't ask me to pair them up the way they are at the beginning of the play. But the point is that each one thinks, "There's only this one woman for me." And through this magic love juice, Hermia and — excuse me. Lysander and Demetrius both end up in love with Hermia, I think it is. And as they say in the notes, "Confusion follows. Chaos follows." These lovers are so obsessed. "There's only one woman for me."

And remember that Shakespeare showed this in *Romeo and Juliet*. One day it was Rosaline. Rosaline is the most perfect woman on earth. It's Rosaline, Rosaline, or death. And then he sees Juliet. And suddenly Juliet's the only woman for him, but it's Juliet or death. And unfortunately, he dies before he could meet another woman, and move on.

And so, for example, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, these lovers get so confused, so totally disoriented. And Lysander is trying to kill Demetrius. And then, the fairies restore order by using this magic love juice to get them lined up, not properly, but just so there could be some resolution at all. And the lovers wake

up from this. And they say, "See, I thought I loved you and you loved me." And they're so confused. And then they say, "This is good. Let's just settle for this." At a point they were on the road to death.

KRISTOL: But don't you think sometimes it seems like in the comedies, they're not perfectly, but there's a little bit of appropriateness in the way people get matched up?

CANTOR: Yes

KRISTOL: The better characters, the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, get the better women.

CANTOR: No, no. That is —

KRISTOL: So, there's kind of a way in which it shows you how to work these things out a little bit, too, maybe.

CANTOR: Yeah, but you always got to give up the desire for the perfect woman. Again, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice is trying to figure out, "Oh, I'd like the happy medium between these two men." And at one point, let's say, Claudio comes in with a bill of particulars what the perfect woman would have. And that's no way to live a human life. And so, as I like to put it in tragedy, the principle is "accept no substitutes". And so, you are going to live or die to get Juliet. But the whole principle of Shakespearean comedy is "accept substitutes." That's what human life is. Yes, human beings are different, but they're not categorically different from each other. There's not just one single perfect woman for you. And again, that's also —

KRISTOL: But also, you wouldn't necessarily be correct in your initial love, 17-year-old falling in love judgment, which is perfect for you, right? Because people end up in better matches sometimes by the end here.

CANTOR: Yes. Another deep convention of this notion of love is love at first sight.

KRISTOL: Right, which at straightforward is not.

CANTOR: Dante sees Beatrice when she's eight years old. I forget how old Laura was when Petrarch first saw her. But Shakespeare saw the absurdity in this. And now, *Romeo and Juliet*, he takes it seriously. When Romeo and Juliet meet and they meet in a sonnet, by the way, to show that they're dominated by a poetic tradition, they fall in love at first sight. And it seems Shakespeare makes it so convincing. But then he shows in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that falling in love at first sight is the equivalent of having taken the love potion. And remember how important a love potion is with the Tristan and Isolde story. And if you're founding your notion of love on the notion of love at first sight, how accurate is that going to be?

And the action in Shakespeare's comedies is very often to give the lovers a chance to get to know each other before they get married. And it usually takes the form — and this gets very interesting in Shakespearean comedy — the woman, for one reason or another, has to disguise herself as a man. It happens with Rosalind in *As You Like It*, it happens with Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. It happens again and again in Shakespearean comedy.

And I think the reason for that is Shakespeare is trying to remake love on the model of friendship. His basic point is that we get our models of love from literature. This, I think, is why he may have felt responsible in this situation. And today when you say, "Where do young people get their idea of romance?" It's from movies and television. I mean, that's where they see it, and whether they want to or not, they grow up imitating that. And Shakespeare saw that this was happening in his day where the models of love were coming out of literature.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio starts hearing Romeo speak about Juliet, he says, "Now, is he for the numbers that Petrarch flowed in." Amazing. I mean, obviously, Shakespeare knows this, but Mercutio knows it: that this is just coming from an Italian poet, this is coming from Petrarch.

And that is Shakespeare's concern, almost as a professional, which is, "What in the world are we poets doing to humanity?" We're feeding whole generations on an absurd notion of love, which is self-destructive and destructive, which is avowedly hostile to normal social function, that in a way teaches kids to rebel against their parents, merely for the sake of rebellion against their parents. And I think he set out to demolish this whole world of courtly love.

And by the way, it is very interesting that Miguel De Cervantes, at almost the exact same time, was doing the exact same thing. I think if you want to understand what's going on in Shakespeare's comedies, the best analog is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, where he takes on the same world of courtly love. He shows that Don Quixote is a man who's gone mad, reading books. And one of the books, they're the tales of chivalry, and this is quite explicit. *Cavalleria*, it is in the Spanish. *Don Quixote* is explicitly an attack on books of chivalry. And for just the same reasons, that it's impractical, it doesn't take into account the normal functions of human life. And it's profoundly associated with Christianity in the work as well, in that Don Quixote keeps calling himself the most Christian of knights. I find it really fascinating that Shakespeare and Cervantes, who died on the exact same date, so they're really —

KRISTOL: Yeah, it's amazing.

CANTOR: They really are contemporaries. I mean, it's fascinating that Shakespeare knew *Don Quixote*. Evidently, he wrote a play based on an episode of *Don Quixote*. It's called *Cardenio*. It's lost, unfortunately. The greatest loss in the history of literature.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's terrible.

CANTOR: Man.

KRISTOL: You should find it. I mean, that would be a genuine contribution.

CANTOR: It's a very complicated situation, because people think it was rewritten by an 18th Century playwright, who had access to the manuscript, which was subsequently burned. Anyway, it's like a whole mystery story even, *Cardenio*. There's been a play written about the writing of it.

Anyway, but I think you really see the convergence of, I would say, the two greatest writers of the age, Shakespeare and Cervantes. Both on this point, that in this regard, the medieval heritage of Europe was really dangerous. And again, it's so attractive to young people to think that love is taking them to heaven. That it's giving them a deeper spirituality. In some sense, it does, but it can get out of hand when love becomes the sole value and you do everything in the name of love, as of course happens with Don Quixote in Cervantes's novel as well.

KRISTOL: Your account of *Midsummer Night's Dream* reminds me of my favorite composer, I think, Wagner might be yours, but my —

CANTOR: My favorite composer is Bach.

KRISTOL: Bach. My God. Okay.

CANTOR: I do not want — Bach is the greatest for me.

KRISTOL: Bach is more intellectual. But Mozart, who was really the greatest composer, *Così fan tutte* when you think about the plot, it's very much like *Midsummer Night's Dream*. These two people who are in a silly, childish way had to think they're headlong-in-heels in love with these women and I think the women are in love with them. And then the philosopher, Don Alfonso, shows them they could just as

easily be reversed once they show up in disguises. I wonder how much — Da Ponte must have known I bet Shakespeare.

CANTOR: Yes. Yeah.

KRISTOL: And obviously you don't have to have that particular play in mind. But the *Così fan tutte* is famously almost nihilistic in its kind of total contempt for that kind of love at first sight, and the kind of cynicism with which it ends, where it's unclear which one should be paired with the other and so forth. Whereas I do come back to the fact that Shakespeare seems to want to get more of an out that's not just, "Let's just be cynical and hard headed about the way things are." I mean, there's a lot of that, but that he wants to give people a sense of how this can be resolved in a way that's in accord with actual human happiness and so forth.

CANTOR: I mean, in Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, this wise man, Prospero —

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting.

CANTOR: — guides his daughter into marriage with a young man. But they must overcome their gnostic tendencies.

KRISTOL: Yeah, that's interesting. Right. So, they — there's a kind of happy ending, which yeah.

CANTOR: Supervised. so there's this moment where Prospero talks to Ferdinand and he tells, "No *carpe diem* thoughts. No 'seize the day' thoughts. You can have plenty of time and have a long life. I don't want you in bed with her tonight." And it's just a brilliant moment where Shakespeare — so much of this is an attitude of tamp it down. Moderate it. "This is just getting out of hand. You're going to kill yourselves if you keep it at this pace."

Let me make one quick comment on what you said about Mozart. The place where this love tradition lasted longest was opera, but it goes all the way through to Wagner.

KRISTOL: But Mozart was hostile to it, if you think about it.

CANTOR: Yes, but that's where —

KRISTOL: And all of them, including *Marriage of Figaro*. I mean, yeah, yeah.

CANTOR: But the reason why you're taking examples from opera, and it's very apt that you do, is that this is where this view of love maintained itself.

KRISTOL: That's true. Yeah, I see what you mean.

CANTOR: And so, people had to keep it. In some ways, Richard Strauss comes back to this in *Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

KRISTOL: But doesn't Beethoven write *Fidelio* as a rebuke to *Così fan tutte*?

CANTOR: Oh yes, because marriage —

KRISTOL: —because it shows marriage as the highest thing, and fidelity. And he hates the fact that Mozart is so, I don't know, hard-headed, let's just say, about it.

CANTOR: Yeah, or who's moral.

KRISTOL: Yeah, well that too.

CANTOR: But it's really I mean, in a way this plays itself out in opera. I mean, the very origins of opera, Monteverdi, L'Orfeo.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Well, that's right, that's amazing.

CANTOR: Yeah. De Rougemont's book is very good at this because he takes it up to the 20th Century.

KRISTOL: Is that right? I will look at that. That's good.

Say a word about comedy and tragedy. So, Shakespeare wrote these comedies, he wrote these extremely famous tragedies, the relationship of the two in general, and the fact that he was able to write both and so forth.

CANTOR: Okay, I'll take another cue from Strauss here. I think I've got the right passage. I think it is from *Socrates and Aristophanes* if I could find it. "Differently stated, comedy can achieve this works since it surpasses tragedy, only by presupposing it, as it is shown most simply by the parodic use that it makes of tragedy." And of course, Strauss is right that there are all these passages from Aeschylus and Euripides that are parodied in Aristophanes' comedies, and Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* is a parody of *Romeo and Juliet*.

KRISTOL: But Shakespeare wrote both, whereas Aristophanes wrote the comedies and —

CANTOR: No, I mean —

KRISTOL: — Aeschylus wrote the tragedies, right?

CANTOR: Well, that is the amazing thing about Shakespeare. That's always worth noting. He's pretty much the only person who was as good at comedy as he was at tragedy. He had such a universal perspective that he could write both. If you go back to the ancient world, you've got tragedians like Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles. And then you've got the comic writers like Aristophanes, but it's very rare to find someone like Shakespeare.

For example, among his contemporaries, Thomas Middleton actually was very good at both comedy and tragedy, but not as good at either as Shakespeare was, and hence nobody remembers Thomas Middleton, except English professors, like me. Shakespeare's the greatest tragedy writer. He's also the greatest comedy writer ever. And not just in the sense, this philosophical sense, of comedy, but funny. He wrote really, really funny plays. And in many ways, invented comic situations that we have to this day.

So, here's a good way of formulating the difference — I'm trying to invoke as many literary critics as I can to give them a say, but philosophers are usually the people who reflect the best on comedy and tragedy. So, Jose Ortega y Gasset, one of the great philosophers of the 20th Century, very famous the first half of the 20th Century. I don't think he's heard of any more at all.

KRISTOL: No, I'm just old enough to have like — He was famous, declining, but still famous, when I was in high school and college. *The Revolt of the Masses* is the one that we all read.

CANTOR: Yeah. *The Revolt of the Masses*, but another essay would be "The Dehumanization of Art." Anyway, he wrote a book called *Meditations on Quixote*, which contains a section called "A Short Treatise on the Novel." It's the most brilliant thing I've ever seen on the genre, the novel. But to define the novel, he goes through the history of literature, where he's talking about tragedy and comedy. And he defines the difference between them this way: that tragedy is about people who strive to be gods and fail whereas comedy is about people who already think they are gods.

And so, I think you can see that relationship in *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Romeo and Juliet* is about two young lovers who think they've achieved something divine. And you can definitely see that in their language, and who constantly say, "If I don't have you, I have nothing." And in

that sense, death is their only response to their loss of each other because then they would be without nothing. So, in some ways, they're trying to be love gods and fail, and that's tragic.

Whereas in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, you have these characters who puff themselves up thinking their love is divine and that they're great models of love. And of course, they aren't. As shown by the fact that when push comes to shove, they'll accept the next person that's in bed with them.

Very often, you could compare Shakespeare's comedies to a game of musical chairs. And people have to switch partners, dance around, and then in the end, when the music stops whomever you're paired with, that's who you marry. And you just accept it. Like in *Much Ado About Nothing* where Claudio thinks he's lost Hero. He was too demanding of her. She has died after he'd insulted her at their wedding. Died of shame. And is told, "Well, okay, that's over and done with." His prince tells him, "There's someone I want you to marry, but you got to marry her unseen." It's the very opposite of love at first sight. Love at sight in a way is so irrational. But Claudio was, "Okay. I'll marry her." And of course, it turns out to be Hero. She didn't really die.

KRISTOL: She's resurrected. You might say.

CANTOR: Yes, yes, oh yes. Like Hermione in *Winter's Tale*. But it's that sense of just he's in such despair. He's so confused. "Okay, I'll take anything." And in a way, that's the attitude you have to take: that it's more important that you make the marriage work and you're committed to it, than that you found the absolutely perfect woman.

So, anyway, in that sense, Shakespeare, you take *Romeo and Juliet* and the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, they have the exact same subject. Romantic love and romantic love against the parents' wishes and all of that. And one ends tragically and one ends comically. And *Romeo and Juliet* ends tragically, because the characters will accept no substitutes. In the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, it ends comically because they will accept substitution.

Now why is substitution the issue here? The question is whether human beings are unique or not. Tragedy deals with a world of unique individuals where there really is only one woman for you or one man for you. Anything short of that is unacceptable. Comedy deals with —

KRISTOL: And even the political tragedies deal with extraordinary individuals.

CANTOR: Yeah. That's what we're getting —

KRISTOL: *Macbeth*, *King Lear* —

CANTOR: What we're getting at here is that Shakespeare's tragedies deal with extraordinary individuals in their extraordinariness. His comedy deals with ordinary individuals in their ordinariness. And I think Shakespeare was able to move between comedy and tragedy — And by the way, not just from play to play, but within plays, with the famous comic relief in his tragedies and what I call the tragic relief in his comedies. When Hero dies in *Much Ado About Nothing*, that looks pretty tragic.

KRISTOL: That could have been a tragedy. When you watch *Much Ado*, I happened to go to *Much Ado About Nothing* a couple of years ago, it could be a tragedy. Just like *Romeo and Juliet* could have been a comedy.

CANTOR: Could have been a comedy, that's the exact — And what it turns on is whether we're dealing with human beings in their extraordinariness, and therefore, their ultimate individuality, or in their ordinariness and their substitutability. And Shakespeare has a sense for both. I think that's where most playwrights or authors, they either are looking at people in their extraordinariness or in their ordinariness. And Shakespeare can see both.

At first, the point about tragedy and why Shakespeare is such a great tragedian is he can see what nobility is. He can look at these figures like King Lear and Marcus Brutus and Coriolanus and Othello and see what extraordinary noble people these are. But that means they're willing to die for what they believe in.

KRISTOL: Yeah. Sees the other side of things, too. And maybe, I'll close with this question which occurred to me as I was looking at *Much Ado About Nothing* when a couple of few months ago you gave a lecture on it, which I happened to see. And I saw you looked at the play for a few minutes and the play begins, Leonato begins, "I learn in this letter." And I thought that's interesting to begin — I have no deep thoughts about this — I just noted this, that it begins with the words, "I learned," which is kind of interesting, if you sort of assume that Shakespeare might be saying something about that.

And I thought, is it fair to say that in the comedies, the characters, at least some of them learn something? They do change. I mean, they learned something about life and about themselves and about love maybe in the course of the comedies. Whereas, I guess in the tragedies, maybe I'm wrong about this, but the tragedies they don't really — people don't learn much. I guess, King Lear, maybe he does. But mostly they just kind of are themselves and they're amazing, interesting characters, right? They do their thing and it ends in blood and death and all that. Do you think there's something to that? That comedies are more educational than tragedies for — Do you see an education going on in a sense in the comedies a little differently from the tragedies?

CANTOR: Well, there's a principle in Greek tragedy you see in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* "to learn through suffering." I think, and obviously, King Lear is someone — The difference is whether you can put the learning to work. And the tragedies happen too late.

KRISTOL: That's interesting. They both learn. It's just the different — You learn too late, right?

CANTOR: You learn too late. A leopard can't change its spots. You can't teach old dogs new tricks. As I see it, another way I formulate the difference is I look at what's a virtue and what's a vice in comedy and tragedy. In tragedy, the great virtue is integrity. It's: "I stand by my principles. I will die for that." The great vice is pliancy. It's compromise. It's giving in. It's not standing by your principles.

It's fascinating to see how that gets reversed in comedy. What is the virtue of integrity in tragedy becomes the vice of stubbornness in comedy. And what is pliancy in tragedy becomes flexibility or adaptability in comedy. Tragic heroes precisely won't change and they learn, but in a way, they learn too late, and when they can't change. And so they learn just before they go to their deaths because they're loyal to their principles.

Comic characters change. The spirit of Shakespearean comedy is very much the spirit of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was William Shakespeare's favorite book and you see it all over in his comedies, above all in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but in *Much Ado* as well. Comedy is the world of transformation in Shakespeare. Tragic characters break. Comic characters bend. It's very easy to see the ignobility of Shakespeare's comic figures. It's what you were referring to when you feel bad when, let's say, the woman ends up without the perfect man. But there's a sense in which that's the virtue of human life, moving on.

Shakespeare's tragic figures can't move on. His comic figures do move on, and in a way, it's accepting second best. Again, that's how he could get so easily from tragedy to comedy. One way, *Romeo and Juliet* is tragic. Hermia and Helena and Lysander and Demetrius is comedy because, "Two lovers, there's no way to resolve it, but four? Okay, We'll just switch them around. Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice." That should be comedy for Shakespeare. It's fascinating that very often he creates comedy just by doubling. And he learned that trick as early as *Comedy of Errors*, where everything depends upon these identical twins. Identical twins freak us out because they go against our notion that we each have a unique identity, "Wait a minute, there's two of that."

KRISTOL: They're useful for a comic point of view?

CANTOR: Yes. Very often you will find comedy with just double things. I remember back in our Harvard days, The Hasty Pudding shows, a friend of mine was writing one of them. He took King Lear and he just had two King Lears come out. "Meantime we shall express our darker purpose." [In another voice:] "Meantime we shall express our darker purpose." And that mere doubling of having two King Lears on stage at once made it into a farce.

Again, Shakespeare is so fantastic. His movement from tragedy to comedy reflects his ability to move from the extraordinariness of human beings to the ordinariness of human beings. He had the most extraordinary sense of human extraordinariness. He created this gallery of heroes. They're just so much larger than life and so noble. But he also had a tremendous sense of ordinariness. And why? That is part of human life.

And so in *Much Ado About Nothing*, we have this fabulous character Dogberry. One of Shakespeare's great, great comic inventions. He would have been played by Will Kemp, the same comedian who created the role of Falstaff. Dogberry's the constable in the scene in *Much Ado About Nothing* and he's in charge of the watch and giving them their instructions. And one of his officers says, "What if we find someone drinking late at night on the streets?" And he says, "Ask them not to drink." But they say, "What if he keeps on drinking?" He says, "Well, then pass him by. Leave him alone. You don't want to wake people up late at night, and besides, we're supposed to police the Duke's subjects. If he's drinking late at night, he's not really one of the Duke's subjects, so you can ignore him."

So it's this incredibly passive police force which cannot enforce any rules. And Dogberry is a very ordinary character, a perfect example of a comic character of Shakespeare, so he can't bring himself to enforce rules on other people. Moreover, he has no sense of pride. Someone is arguing with someone and someone says to him, "You're tedious, Dogberry. You're tedious." He says, "Thank you so much. I was trying very hard to be tedious." Then someone calls him an ass. And for the rest of the play he says, "Be sure you write me down an ass." He wants to make sure that this guy's act of lèse-majesté has been recorded: "Be sure you write me down an ass." But for the rest of the play — He is very related to Nick Bottom in *Midsummer's Night Dream* in that sense, who's transformed to an ass.

But the nice thing about him is he never provoked any problems to the community. So many of Shakespeare's problematic characters are busy bodies and trying to enforce rules over others. And so, in the irony of this comedy, it is Dogberry who hears Don John's plot against Claudio and Hero, and so he actually breaks up the main nefarious plot in the play. And when this is being explained to the Duke and whoever's running the city, the character whose name is Borachio, which means the "drunkard" says, "What your wisdoms could not discover, these shallow fools have brought to light."

KRISTOL: That's good. That's good.

CANTOR: And it is the joke of the play that all the great rulers, all the people who run the world, their wisdom is foolishness. And it's the shallow fools that resolve the problem. "What your wisdoms could not discover —"

KRISTOL: They need a touch of Dogberry, right?

CANTOR: Again, to get back to the very beginning —

KRISTOL: Yeah, let's finish up here.

CANTOR: What's very philosophical about Shakespeare is this, that the wisdom of the world is foolishness. That's a religious principle, but Shakespeare carries it on into the tradition of Erasmus' praise of folly, very much of the tradition of Socrates choosing his examples from very common people, shoemakers and so on. In that sense, Shakespeare's sense of human ordinariness is a sense of human nature. It really is getting to understand the natural as opposed to the conventional. I could show that in so many ways — *King Lear* and his tragedies.

But in the comedies, it comes down to this point that people have become captives of phony conventions in love. They're just reading Dante. They're reading Petrarch — and by the way, there was a huge vogue of sonnet writing in the 1580s in England. People are getting their ideas from books. That's convention, and you just got to get back to the natural in love. And love is based in sexual attraction which in that sense, is very much in human nature. But you don't just leave it in the absence of any sort of social control.

You can put it this way--that Shakespeare has a very complex understanding of the relation of nature and convention, which I think is very similar to Plato's. Which is this: Yes, nature and convention get out of whack. It's definitely characteristic of human societies that they fall into conventional habits; over time convention drifts too far from nature. Yes, it is natural for human beings to sing about love. "Birds do it, bees do it." Shakespeare understands that it's natural that we get poetic about this very powerful sexual feeling, but sometimes it just gets out of hand.

For Shakespeare, the program is always bring convention more in harmony with nature. I don't think he ever believed for a moment that there would not be a gap between nature and convention, that convention could ever become purely nature. But you can still evaluate conventions insofar as they are further or closer from nature. I think his whole poetic project in the comedies was to bring our love conventions more in harmony with nature, so that — Again he doesn't want purely animal sexuality. He does want marriage, which is something conventional. He does think that love must be built into the conventions of a community. But again, there are different conventions. And Shakespeare never just says, "All conventions are equal." In fact, he's always evaluating them, whether they're closer to nature or not. His great project in his comedies is to look at love and say, "How could it be more natural?"

KRISTOL: Right.

CANTOR: You don't want it to be perfectly natural, you want it to fit into the city, the community, in that sense, it has to have an element of convention. I think this is ultimately the teaching in *King Lear* as well, but in some ways it's clearer in these comedies. And again, that would make the comedies very, very philosophical.

KRISTOL: That's a good note to end on. We have to come back and do *King Lear* one of these days.

CANTOR: We still haven't done *King Lear*.

KRISTOL: No, I find that such a mystifying play, but we'll do that someday. And there's more to say about the comedies too, but let's end with that.

This has been a very stimulating conversation, not just about Shakespeare, but about comedy and tragedy and literary, other literary matters and philosophic matters really. But I will say that young lovers who are watching this, should write us at Conversations with Bill Kristol and I'll forward all of your extremely angry and annoyed and intemperate objections to Paul Cantor himself. And you'll have to answer each one of them when these young lovers write in saying that you're being much too disrespectful of their unique love, for their unique love at first sight, object of their love.

CANTOR: I'm only trying to save their lives.

KRISTOL: You can explain that to them when they email in your email response. Paul Cantor, thank you for joining me in this very interesting conversation.

And thank you for joining us on CONVERSATIONS.

[END]