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Paul Cantor on Shakespeare, the Romans, and Austrian Economics



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Allen Mendenhall Interviews Paul Cantor About His New Book, *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy: The Twilight of the Ancient World*.

AM: Thanks for doing this interview, Paul. Your latest book is *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy*, which analyzes three plays: *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Could you speak to the themes of freedom and independence in the Roman Republic as against the

Roman Empire?

PC: My book views the three Roman plays as a trilogy, portraying the rise and fall of the Roman Republic, and its transformation into the Roman Empire. For Shakespeare, as for many thinkers, the Roman Republic is a world of citizens; the Roman Empire a world of subjects. In the Republic, the Romans have a say in their own destiny, which concretely means that they participate in the political life of the city. In the Empire, they cede control of their lives to the Emperor, becoming the passive subjects of a remote ruler. Cassius sums it all up when he complains of Julius Caesar's incipient imperial rule: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings." Here is the spirit of the Republic—Cassius will not pass the buck to some kind of fatalism, but takes responsibility for his status in the city.

AM: We're talking here for a libertarian audience. What will libertarians gain from this book?

PC: First of all, I have to say that I don't think that Shakespeare was what we think of as a libertarian. He does not display much interest in economic liberty or free markets. But he was interested in political liberty and that's what the Roman Republic represented for him.

The republican regime worked to prevent the emergence of one-man rule in the city, which the Romans regarded as tyranny. Shakespeare noted just what the American Founding Fathers did when they turned to Rome as a model for the U.S. Constitution: separation of powers and checks and balances. The overarching theme of the Roman plays is the corruption of the republican constitution as a result of foreign conquests, and the consequent emergence of Caesarism. These issues are still very much relevant to us today.

AM: How are they relevant?

PC: One thing libertarians in the U.S. today criticize is the way that the Constitution has been corrupted over the years. It was to a large extent conceived originally in a libertarian spirit, as a way of limiting the powers of the central government. But just as Shakespeare shows happening in ancient Rome, America's involvement in foreign wars led to an exponential growth in the power of the central government. In particular, it led to a massive increase in the role of the Executive Power in the U.S. and specifically the emergence of an imperial presidency. Based on what Shakespeare knew of Rome, he would have recognized this development easily. In Shakespeare's Rome, it takes the form of Caesarism—the great military leader assuming dictatorial control over the community. The United States has not experienced exactly this phenomenon, but a disproportionate number of its presidents based their political careers on their military exploits. That's something that should trouble us, and Shakespeare's portrait of Julius Caesar can help us think about it.

AM: If Shakespeare's interest seems to be in republican government, how should we read his rendering of militarist, imperialist

foreign policy in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*?

PC: We should never forget that Shakespeare had a tragic view of life. He did not think that there is any permanent solution to human problems, and if things eventually went wrong in the Roman Republic, that's par for the tragic course for Shakespeare. He deeply admired aristocratic virtue, and for him that manifests itself largely in war. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are almost all military leaders in one form or another. I believe that Shakespeare felt that the Roman Republic had a pretty good run—nearly 450 years from the days of Coriolanus to the days of Julius Caesar. That's about twice as long as the U.S. Constitution has lasted as of this moment. So Rome's political achievement is impressive. Rome conquered the Mediterranean world and produced a remarkable series of martial heroes in the process. Eventually Rome was corrupted by its very success and its conquests subverted the republican constitution. One of the central points of my book is that for Shakespeare, the story of the Roman Republic is a tragedy. Like one of its heroes, the Republic was eventually destroyed by its own success.

AM: Does money factor into the gradual transition from polis to Empire in the Roman plays?

PC: Shakespeare shows that money was one of the principal factors in the corruption of the republican regime. The great generals like Pompey and Julius Caesar became fabulously wealthy by plundering the provinces they conquered and administered. With that money they were able essentially to buy political offices for themselves and their cronies. Moreover, they paid their soldiers directly from their war booty. Thus their armies became directly loyal to them, and no longer to Rome. Thus, when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon and marched on Rome, he knew that his soldiers would stay loyal to him and ignore the Senate's orders against him. We probably don't need the lesson from Shakespeare, but he does teach that money is an incredibly corrupting force in politics.

AM: Shakespeare's Roman plays were of course written during a particular time and at a particular place. What political warnings might they have conveyed to the British monarch?

PC: I believe that Shakespeare was cautioning the Stuart monarchs against their creeping absolutism and encouraging them to remake the monarchy on the model of the Roman Republic. He hoped that without formally abolishing monarchy, the British could adopt something like the Roman mixed regime. As Shakespeare shows in *Henry V*, the ideal British king would give the nobles and the common people a sense that they have a stake in the regime and even an active role to play in it. It may sound crazy, but I believe that Shakespeare played a role in the way that the British developed a constitutional monarchy, with checks and balances on the king's power. By the eighteenth century, Montesquieu was describing Britain as a republic masquerading as a monarchy.

AM: The plebeians play interesting roles in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, yet they're absent in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Is this absence significant? What does it mean?

PC: The turning point of Shakespeare's Roman trilogy occurs in the middle of Act III of *Julius Caesar*. The plebeians in effect decide the issue of Republic vs. Empire by siding with the imperial party of Mark Antony and Octavius Caesar against the republican party of Brutus and Cassius. They take Antony's bribe of 75 drachmas apiece to give up their active role in the regime. Even before, when they proclaim that Brutus should be Caesar, they have opted for one-man rule in Rome. Rome will have a Caesar: the only question is: which one? After the plebeians abdicate their power, they have one brief fling as rioters and then they are seen no more in Shakespeare's Roman plays. The plebeians were active in checking and balancing power in the Republic; once they become passive spectators of the action, Rome descends into imperial rule.

AM: Part of Shakespeare's brilliance involves his ability to be all things to all people—that is, to appeal to audiences with different backgrounds, perspectives, nationalities, and politics. How cautious should libertarians be about reading Shakespeare's work with an eye toward affirming their convictions?

PC: Shakespeare had an uncanny mimetic power. Because he could do such a great job of representing the world, it's easy for people to look at his plays and take whatever their favorite categories are for analyzing the world and use them to analyze Shakespeare's plays. And because of Shakespeare's prestige and genuine greatness, we all want him to share whatever our personal convictions may be. That's why Shakespeare always looks Marxist to Marxists. But as much as I wish Shakespeare were a libertarian, I have to say that I don't believe he was. He admired heroic, aristocratic virtue, not commercial, middle-class virtue. That is why you'll never see a businessman as the hero of a Shakespeare play. And I must come back to the fact that Shakespeare wrote tragedies. That's a very important fact about Shakespeare, the full consequences of which are often lost sight of. Libertarianism is emphatically not a tragic view of life. It rests on the Enlightenment idea that if we follow the middle-class virtues, we can live together in peace and prosperity. Shakespeare explores that view of life in his comedies, but his tragedies—which seem so much more fundamental to us—portray a world in which conflict is more central to human existence than harmony.

AM: In what ways was Shakespeare, in your words, "one of the most profound thinkers on the subject of ancient Rome"?

PC: Many people mistakenly believe that Shakespeare knew nothing about ancient Rome; that his Romans are merely Elizabethan Englishmen dressed up in togas. But in fact Shakespeare understood very well what distinguishes the Roman Republic as a community and what its distinctive place in history is. He understood how a republic differs from a monarchy, and he understood how a pagan community differs from a Christian one. He uses his Roman plays to explore what happens when a pagan republic focuses its activity almost exclusively on political life.

Thus Shakespeare is an important figure in a long line of thinkers for whom understanding ancient Rome was central to understanding something more general about the human condition. He almost certainly knew Machiavelli's work on Rome, and as I show at length in my book, Shakespeare's view of Rome can be profitably compared with Nietzsche's. I also bring up Montesquieu in my book and even have a brief section comparing Shakespeare and Hegel on Rome. Shakespeare is worthy of being compared with such great thinkers and indeed it turns out that his understanding of Rome is very similar.

AM: You've devoted much of your career to Shakespeare. When did you first become interested in him?

PC: I grew up in a home in which literature was taken very seriously. My grandfather had a Ph.D. in English and my mother had an M.A. My father was a book collector and so I grew up surrounded by books, including many editions of Shakespeare. My older brother shared with me what he learned in literature courses at Cornell. I cannot remember exactly when I first encountered Shakespeare, but it was very early. When other kids in Brooklyn were going to Dodgers games at Ebbets Field, my mother was taking me to Stratford, Connecticut, which at that time had a very active Shakespeare Festival every summer. Perhaps the greatest theatrical experience of my life was seeing Morris Carnovsky play King Lear there. So very early on I learned the power of Shakespeare onstage. As for the academic study of Shakespeare, my 9th grade class at Meyer Levin Junior High School did a major project on *Julius Caesar*, and that's when I first learned to work on a play in depth. My interest in the Roman plays goes way back.

AM: When did you first become interested in Austrian economics? How has it shaped your career as a literary critic?

PC: I first became interested in Austrian economics when I was 13 or 14 years old. My brother Donald was then at NYU law school and studying with the great labor law professor, Sylvester Petro, who was a friend of Ludwig von Mises and recommended his books in his classes. Not one to mess around, I read *Human Action*. I got hooked quickly on Austrian economics and was the first kid on my block to learn the word "epistemological." When I was 15, a friend and I had the audacity to call up Mises at home and he graciously invited us to attend his NYU seminar. So I got a very good grounding in Austrian economics before I even went to college. I have not devoted my whole career to studying literature in light of Austrian economics; I have been influenced by a wide range of interpretive approaches. But starting in the 1990s with my essay on Thomas Mann and the German hyperinflation, I found many areas in which my grounding in Austrian economics helped me to understand literary works. More generally, my Austrian background led me to drop my cultural elitism and learn to appreciate the importance and greatness of commercial culture. That led to my studies of movies and television—perhaps the best-known aspect of my career.

AM: Thank you for doing this interview, Paul. Your work at drawing libertarians to the arts and humanities is unparalleled. I hope many others follow in your footsteps.

Paul A. Cantor is Clifton Waller Barrett Professor of English at the University of Virginia. He is the author of [The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture: Liberty vs. Authority in American film and TV](#). He is the co-editor, with Stephen Cox, of [Literature and the Economics of Liberty](#). See his interview in the [Austrian Economics Newsletter](#).

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