

The Nietzschean Shakespeare

Vickie B. Sullivan

Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire

By Paul A. Cantor

(University of Chicago Press, 2nd ed., 2017)

Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy: The Twilight of the Ancient World

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Montesquieu, a thinker of great acuity, wrote in his private notebook that from the perspective of solely human causes the development of Christianity had to “be the strangest event of its kind that has ever occurred.” What amazed Montesquieu was the fact that the mighty Romans, who conquered on three continents—Europe, Africa, and Asia—ultimately succumbed to peaceful conquest by a new type of morality. Whereas the pagan Romans had been fierce victors, the new Christian Romans lauded meekness and decried war. Rome went from the center of an earthly empire to the seat of a spiritual one.

Rome’s transformation from a pagan warrior society to a Christian one is the prime example of the phenomenon that Friedrich Nietzsche would later term the transvaluation of values. It is also the riddle that Paul Cantor, a professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Virginia, looks to the Roman plays of William Shakespeare to explain. Cantor’s great achieve-

ment in these two books—one originally published in 1976 and recently reissued with a new preface, and the other a new volume that pursues the questions of the first in a more forthright manner—is to highlight the depth of Shakespeare’s understanding of the early Roman republic, the empire it became, and most importantly and prominently in the later volume, how that empire prepared the way for the emergence of Christianity. An eminently learned and perceptive commentator, Cantor does the great service of revealing the titanic intellect of a playwright whose artistic creations contain powerful historical and psychological explanations of a moral revolution.

In order to accomplish this feat, Cantor must first establish that Shakespeare was a political thinker. Specifically, he must show that although Shakespeare lived under a monarchy that ruled in the name of the one true God, the playwright understood the passions and motivations of pagans who ruled themselves in a republican form of govern-

ment and thus could depict them insightfully on the stage. Such a claim is controversial in current scholarly circles, where cultural paradigms are often viewed as the impenetrable boundaries to human understanding. Skepticism toward Shakespeare's political acumen, in particular, has a venerable history. As Cantor himself points out, eighteenth-century critic Samuel Johnson argued that Shakespeare's plays merely depicted Englishmen of his own day costumed as Romans.

Shakespeare's Rome argues forcefully against this crabbed notion of Shakespeare's genius. There, Cantor adduces powerful examples of Shakespeare's ability to transcend his own time period and depict a very different type of existence than that which he and his contemporaries experienced. That Shakespeare understood the intricacies of self-government and the demands it placed on its citizens, Cantor establishes with his commentary on *Coriolanus*. For example, Shakespeare accurately depicts the political structure of the early Roman republic. Two elected consuls from the patrician class rule in collaboration with the aristocratic senate, but the nobles must take some account of the people because the newly introduced office of the tribunes, which gives voice to the plebeians, has veto power. The playwright also depicts the manner in which such a martial republic imposes its conception of virtue on its citizens. Cantor shows through an examination of motherhood in the play that "the Roman republic" intends to make "eros serve spiritedness, and thus in turn the common good."

Shakespeare's Rome focuses on just two of the three plays that Cantor examines in his later work: *Coriolanus*, a tale of an outstanding warrior who in a fit of pique defects from Rome to fight for its enemy city when he cannot accommodate himself to the demands of the people; and *Antony and Cleopatra*, the great love story between the Roman triumvir and the Egyptian queen that also depicts the moment of transition to empire when

Octavius defeats in battle Antony, his former colleague in rule, to become Rome's first emperor. Just over forty years later, Cantor has returned to Shakespeare's depiction of Rome and brings a third play, *Julius Caesar*, into his analysis. In doing so, he admits that both Shakespeare and Rome have been lifelong "obsessions." *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy* is thus the product of mature reflection.

Although the topic is the same, Cantor acknowledges that his newer book is more forthcoming about its real subject—not only how pagan and republican Rome gave way to the one-man rule of an emperor, but also how it came to accept the Christian God. Conceding that this theme was present in *Shakespeare's Rome* in only a subtle manner, Cantor points out that its notes document Shakespeare's puzzling and anachronistic references to Christianity in *Antony and Cleopatra* and that each of his book's two parts presents as its epigraph a quotation from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. Cantor explains his prior reticence and indirect references to the German philosopher with the reflection that back then he "had even greater doubts about the advisability of openly using Nietzsche's thought... as a guide to Shakespeare's." Cantor does not elaborate on the reasons for his change of heart, but in the wake of the publication of *Shakespeare's Rome* many scholars, political scientists in particular, have looked to Shakespeare for serious reflection on political life. He has, therefore, helped nurture a more receptive audience for the type of analysis he offers.

In any case, Cantor no longer has his old compunctions. The relation between Shakespeare's thought and that of Nietzsche is the new book's overt topic. Nevertheless, the precise nature of that relationship is quite complicated on Cantor's reading. In this reader's view, the comparison Cantor offers ultimately serves to highlight Shakespeare's acuity while doing no great service to Nietzsche's.

Although Cantor has been long intrigued by “Nietzschean” elements in the Roman plays, it is obviously impossible that Nietzsche’s critique of Christian morality influenced Shakespeare. Did Shakespeare influence Nietzsche, then? Cantor’s most salient evidence is the fact that young Friedrich read Shakespeare, particularly *Julius Caesar*, with great enthusiasm. (His interest seems to have been fired by a Christmas gift of Shakespeare’s complete works.) References to Shakespeare abound in Nietzsche’s mature writings. Even so, there is no textual evidence that he knew *Coriolanus* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Later, when developing the category he terms the *übermensch*, Nietzsche drew from Shakespeare’s great tragic characters, along with those of Byron and Schiller. In their literary works, he found the example of individuals so outstanding that they transgress the norms of their own time such that they are, in Nietzsche’s parlance, “beyond good and evil.”

On the whole, though, Cantor’s analysis shows that Nietzsche was not a particularly deep reader of Shakespeare. For example, both as a high school student and as the author of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche focused on the theme of friendship in *Julius Caesar*. He overlooked historical, moral, and psychological themes in the play, the very issues on which he focused in his *Genealogy of Morals*. Moreover, Cantor finds that Shakespeare gives a fuller account of the transition from pagan to Christian Rome than does Nietzsche. An adequate account of the development that amazed Montesquieu would have to explain why the conquering Romans came to accept notions that at an earlier time would have been utterly incomprehensible to them—that defeat is victory, weakness strength, and death life. This inversion is quite an achievement and shows that those who subscribed to what Nietzsche called “slave morality” were not without formidable resources, namely, a cunning guile. It turns out that Nietzsche is not so

perspicuous a guide to the transvaluation of values because he has no explanation for the process by which the strong accepted the morality of the weak.

In Cantor’s depiction of Shakespeare’s Rome, by contrast, it is members of Rome’s ruling and warrior aristocratic class who are the traducers of its master morality. He points out that Caesar, rather than being contemptuous of the lower class in the manner of the aristocratic Coriolanus, was inclined to weep “when the poor have cried.” Cantor, though, does not underscore to the degree that he might have the parallels Shakespeare evokes between Christ’s triumph in death and Caesar’s. He shows, however, that Shakespeare’s Antony is keenly aware of the richness of worlds and possibilities that lie beyond Rome. “Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch/Of the ranged empire fall,” he says in the first scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*. An ambivalent Roman, Antony finds release from the austerity of republican morals in Egypt’s luxurious corruption and ultimately in an afterlife where he will join Cleopatra and “souls do couch on flowers.”

No other scholar so fully and convincingly conveys the manner in which Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* offers a rich, anticipatory depiction of the cataclysmic event that would shortly occur in Rome’s eastern empire. Cantor points out that Shakespeare has Octavius declare that “the time of universal peace is near.” In fact, during his rule the Prince of Peace would be born in Bethlehem. Shakespeare thus identifies spiritual and intellectual alternatives that were simply unfathomable for the brutish warriors of Rome’s early republic.

If Shakespeare is right, the seeds of Rome’s transformation were planted before the emergence of Christianity. This insight is valuable because, as Cantor writes, “Nietzsche’s account of the slave revolt in morality fails to explain exactly how the slaves manage to pull off this trick.” Inspired by Shakespeare’s

elegant portrayal, Cantor scours Nietzsche's other writings, particularly his notebooks, to locate an explanation. He discovers that Nietzsche found the beginnings of slave morality not in Rome but rather with Jewish priests, who embraced military defeats as a means to their social elevation, and with Socrates, whom Nietzsche regards as a plebeian clever enough to overturn the morality of the Athenian aristocrats. Thus, Cantor concludes that "Shakespeare's Roman plays" help "to highlight the complexity of [Nietzsche's] views on a subject on which he is often thought to have adopted a simple, one-sided position."

A deep understanding of Shakespeare serves as a guide to Nietzsche's thought in another way, Cantor finds. He cites Nietzsche's reflection in *Beyond Good and Evil* that master and slave morality can mix in creative ways in a single soul. By bringing such characters to life, Shakespeare illustrates how the seemingly impossible combination of attributes could combine in an individual. In Cantor's view, Shakespeare's English king Henry V endeavors "to combine the toughness and aggressiveness of a classical hero with the moral decency and sympathetic feelings of a Christian," with largely successful, though short-lived, results. Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth also offer attempts at such a synthesis with tragic

results. Again, it is Shakespeare's acumen that fulfills Nietzsche's musings.

Beyond the major arguments in the pages of these books, Cantor's notes are rich and illuminating. A reader finds references to outstanding nineteenth-century historians such as Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges and Jacob Burckhardt as well as to recent scholars of Roman history. Cantor uses their findings to offer a rich depiction of Rome and its influence, but reflection on those findings reveals that they corroborate the playwright's insights so many centuries before. Cantor shows that not only historians but also other philosophers besides Nietzsche—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels—affirm facets of Rome, its politics, its historical trajectory, and its influence on the individuals who inhabited it that Shakespeare conveys onstage. Nietzsche may have coined the term, but when it comes to the depth of understanding of this, "the strangest event of its kind that has ever occurred," Shakespeare, the playwright, is the true superman. In bringing this greatness to light, Cantor simultaneously reveals himself as a critic truly worthy of the bard.

Vickie B. Sullivan is the Cornelia M. Jackson Professor of Political Science at Tufts University. Her latest book is Montesquieu and the Despotism of Ideas of Europe.