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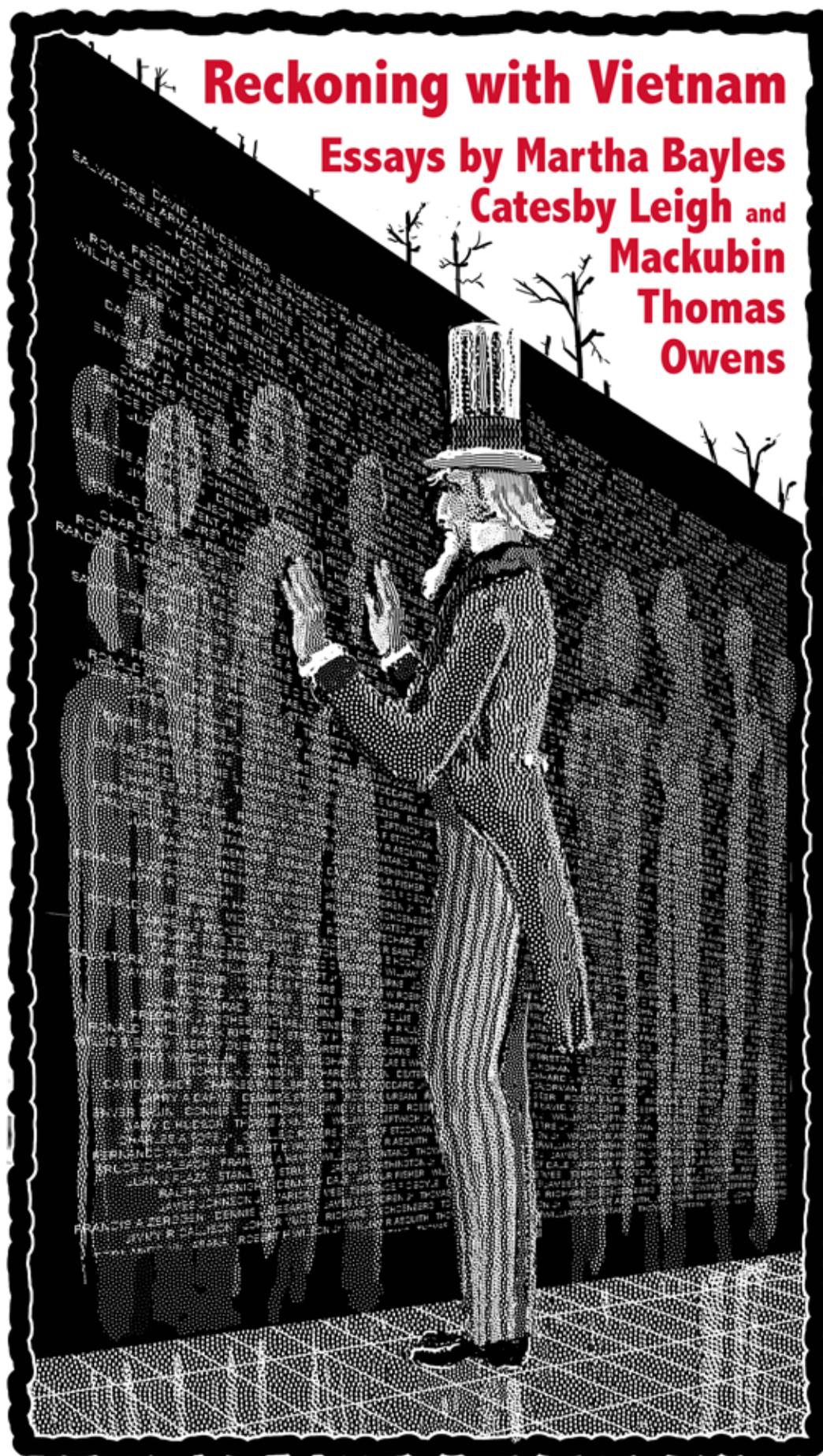
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SLOUCHING TOWARD BETHLEHEM

Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire, by Paul A. Cantor.
The University of Chicago Press, 240 pages, \$22.50

Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy: The Twilight of the Ancient World, by Paul A. Cantor.
The University of Chicago Press, 320 pages, \$30



DAVID LOWENTHAL, NOW AT ASSUMPTION College but then teaching political science at Boston College, identified a school of literary criticism emerging in the 1970s and '80s, which he christened "The New Shakespeareans." These scholars, following the lead of Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa in their book, *Shakespeare's Politics* (1964), were not united by ideology or political purpose but by a novel approach toward the Bard's plays, reading them as if they were as serious and thoughtful as the greatest philosophical works known to mankind. The New Shakespeareans, which included John Alvis, Jan Blits, and Michael Platt, offered interpretations that were intrepid—even swashbuckling—yet based on scrupulous attention to textual evidence that could not be dismissed. More than a dozen examples of this rich new criticism were collected by Alvis and Thomas West into the volume *Shakespeare as Political Thinker* (1981).

It is difficult to recapture the excitement, but imagine suddenly discovering that the autobiographical details, historical background, source materials, and other external evidence normally used to aid readers in appreciating Shakespeare are actually far less interesting than simply reading him as if

he has something to teach us, and we have something to learn. What if William Shakespeare was actually *more* thoughtful than virtually every generation since his death already has told us? If so, his teaching could then be compared with other thinkers' before and after him to create a dialogue across the centuries about the perennial issues that still perplex us.

AMONG THE VERY BEST EXAMPLES OF the New Shakespeareans' groundbreaking scholarship is Paul Cantor's *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire*, first published in 1976 and now newly reissued. A professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Virginia, Cantor successfully shows that Shakespeare's treatment of Rome in *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* is purposeful and systematic, and yields fascinating political and philosophical implications. In order to understand the difficulty of Cantor's accomplishment, one must recall that virtually everyone in the field of literature at the time simply assumed that Shakespeare had only a passing familiarity with the real historical Rome. Cantor devotes considerable attention to establishing the possibility that Shakespeare's plays could

be rigorously analyzed as serious works of intellectual history.

For example, one of the most interesting aspects of Rome presented by Shakespeare is the transition from the ancient virtues extolled in the republican period in *Coriolanus* to the new empire of love in *Antony and Cleopatra*. Romans' self-understanding, the types of political issues they faced, and their adherence to pagan religion were all in flux as the modern world approached. Shakespeare presents a careful consideration of the conditions that led to the single greatest revolution in the West: the conversion of the known world to Christianity. If this reading seems obvious now, it is only because Cantor and the New Shakespeareans have made it so.

HOW DID SHAKESPEARE HIMSELF regard the triumph of Christianity? Was it merely coincidence that a new universal religion arose at the moment the entire Mediterranean world was under universal political rule? What accounts for the underlying moral revolution that replaced Roman honor with selfless love as the new highest calling? These tantalizing issues were addressed in *Shakespeare's Rome*, but as is the case with any good book, Cantor resolves many questions but



also raises others. Identifying Shakespeare's interest in the rise of Christianity is only a first step to seeing how he compares with thinkers such as Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Gibbon, Hegel, and Nietzsche, who devoted so much attention to the same subject.

Fortunately, Cantor has now published the even more ambitious sequel to his earlier work, *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy: The Twilight of the Ancient World*. Here, he retraces Rome's political evolution in *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, but provides a potentially deeper and more persuasive analysis, which offers a new layer of complexity to the changing character of Rome and the subtle efforts Shakespeare employs to indicate his own intentions. The heart of the book is a tour de force of a mature scholar in command both of his material and of the vast amount of secondary literature surrounding an author like Shakespeare. Cantor's ultimate purpose, however, is not simply to confirm the argument of his previous book. Unlike his earlier, more esoteric presentation, he now makes an explicit and often provocative effort to demonstrate a deep intellectual kinship between Shakespeare and Friedrich Nietzsche. He is not attempting to prove Shakespeare's influence on Nietzsche, but rather to demonstrate that both authors were engaged in a kind of "imaginative archaeology" to recover and understand what the world was like prior to Christianity's influence.

Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* begins at the pivotal moment when ordinary Romans (*plebians*) gain political representation with the creation of the office of the tribunes. There is a strong impression that there is nothing more important than participation in traditional civic life. Dedication to Rome and to its defense is the highest calling of every man, woman, and child. It is therefore striking that the opening of *Julius Caesar* is filled with indications of a new horizon in politics. The plebs are now more interested in following individual leaders than in being citizens. Dedication to Rome has become dedication to Caesar. The remaining office-holders of the ill-fated republic are trying to preserve the old order, but it is almost impossible to tell whether they are acting on behalf of the city or themselves.

As Cantor points out, the change that occurs between the two plays runs much deeper. The patricians in *Julius Caesar* who champion the ancient republic no longer speak in Latin amongst themselves, they have debates about Greek philosophy, and they no longer seem

certain about the purpose of human action. There is much talk of dedication to the general good of Rome, but their resolve to act is repeatedly haunted by soothsayers, auguries, dreams, omens, and a ghost. The obvious benefits of establishing a successful empire have come at the price of undermining the single-minded loyalty that made success possible. These characters speak and attempt to act in defense of the ancient republic, but Shakespeare allows readers to see that they have already ceased to be Roman in their hearts. According to Cantor, by the end of *Julius Caesar* Rome "is dead in principle."

AFTER READING THE FIRST TWO Roman plays, the world of *Antony and Cleopatra* seems altogether new. In the short span of time since Antony's artful rise to power after Caesar's assassination, he is now uninterested in political life. (As Harry Jaffa once put it, Antony has become "Chairman of the Bored.") "The time of universal peace is near," proclaims Augustus Caesar, and, for Antony, the private pleasures of love and feasting with Cleopatra do seem more fulfilling. When we remember the degree to which Coriolanus' family was dedicated to the city of Rome, Antony's all-consuming extra-marital obsession with an Egyptian princess is startling. Their love affair is unstable and sometimes volatile, but this volatility makes it all the more exciting. According to Cantor, their *eros* has been liberated from the city in a way that was unthinkable before. As the play progresses, and the political pressures increase, their love sometimes becomes the source of an infinite hope for fulfillment.

By the end of the play, the love of Antony and Cleopatra becomes so "transpolitical" that they condemn this world and begin to focus exclusively on the world to come. They die in desperate faith that they will live together in an eternity of perfect love. The immortality sought by Coriolanus and Brutus—to be the most honorable or noble Roman—has been effaced by a new afterlife with promises that no dull city of man could bestow. Given the historical moment of the setting, the numerous references to Herod of Judea, and the spiritual language of their dying words, Cantor's argument that this play (and the entire trilogy) is a deep and serious meditation on the origins of Christianity is persuasive.

Reading *Shakespeare's Rome* and *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy* together makes Cantor's

comparison of Shakespeare with Nietzsche all the more provocative. In Shakespeare the rise of Christianity comes about through slow, discernable changes within Rome's political life. Nietzsche's published writings are famous (and infamous) for making the opposite claim. In his view, Christianity was not the result of unintended changes brought about by the shift from republic to empire, but rather by the sudden attack of "renegade" aristocrats who crassly used new religious teachings to their own advantage. They succeeded by employing a new moral teaching in which obedience, forgiveness, and humility are man's highest aspirations. The older Roman virtues grounded in manly assertion were only possible in practice for a small minority of aristocrats, but the new moral teaching and its appeal to the vast majority of mankind—already in servitude—proved unstoppable. The unarmed and weak were able to overcome the armed and powerful once they were united by the manipulation of a new priestly class. According to Cantor, Shakespeare's version of events is more plausible because it demonstrates the slow softening of Rome that prepared the path for Christianity's success. The upending of martial virtues was less the consequence of a slave revolt in morality than it was an invisible shift that had already taken place within the ruling class itself.

Cantor's new book ends with a reconsideration of Nietzsche based on the philosopher's unpublished writings, and purports to show that he independently came to share a view more similar to Cantor's Shakespeare. Readers will have to decide for themselves whether or not Shakespeare and Nietzsche share similar views on the origins of Christianity and its political consequences, but, in my view, Cantor does prove that Shakespeare deserves to be taken seriously as a thinker. It should go without saying that these Roman plays have been, and will continue to be, enjoyed by audiences with no interest in political thought or philosophy. But there is also something "systematic and comprehensive" in Shakespeare's plays for those with the patience to look more closely. For this discovery, ordinary readers like me are indebted to Paul Cantor and the New Shakespeareans.

Rafael Major is senior lecturer in the Honors College and Political Science Department at the University of North Texas, and is currently completing a book-length study of Shakespeare's comedies.

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