

Statecraft as Stagecraft

An international-relations scholar considers the relation between politics and theater—with Shakespeare as his guide.

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The Hollow Crown: Shakespeare on How Leaders Rise, Rule, and Fall, by Eliot Cohen (Basic, 288 pp., \$30)

Kings, presidents, and corporate titans may not undergo Shakespeare's [seven parts](#) in their careers. But all rise to power, exercise it, and fall from it. That basic and perennial fact about leaders is Eliot Cohen's first lesson in *The Hollow Crown: Shakespeare on How Leaders Rise, Rule, and Fall*. This arc of power, argues Cohen, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and former State Department counselor, offers many lessons about power and those who wield it.

Statesmanship is not a static concept but a living drama with various acts and scenes. To exercise power, one must first acquire it, and in Cohen's taxonomy, the first act of power is how one enters the stage. A would-be leader traditionally gains power via three possible routes: "by inheritance, by acquisition through cunning or skill, and by seizure through conspiracy or coup." Each method has advantages and disadvantages, but the acquisition of power necessarily influences its exercise. "[T]hose who seize power are often caught up by the unforeseen consequences of their own actions," Cohen says.

How a leader behaves while maintaining power often anticipates the manner in which he will leave his position, whether by "folly," by "mischance," or "sometimes even by relinquishing it voluntarily." Few ever relinquish power willingly, hence the eighteenth-century world's stunned reaction to George Washington. But Washington was not necessarily happy when leaving public office, as Cohen shows: not because he regretted his decision, but because friendships and the good will of companions wither in the harsh light of political choices.

"It is the nature of power to be fragile and contingent, and it is the nature of powerful men and women to forget that fact," Cohen observes. What remains eternally true is that "sooner or later those who wield power lose it." For every entrance, there's always already an exit. The nature of that exit, however, is a key question; so is when to make it.

To reveal the finer strains of this arc of power, Cohen borrows from Shakespeare, using various of the playwright's histories, tragedies, and comedies as his score. His cast of characters is recognizable: Henry V,

Richards II and III, Macbeth, Lear, Brutus and Julius Caesar, Prospero, Bolingbrook/Henry IV, Cloten, the intellectual-but-hapless Henry VI. Any thoughtful reader will enjoy the book. But its natural audience is the contemporary practitioner or student of international relations and great-power politics, who may not have encountered the Bard outside pop-culture imitations *The Lion King* (*Hamlet*), *Ten Things I Hate About You* (*The Taming of the Shrew*), or *West Side Story* (*Romeo and Juliet*). In this sense, *The Hollow Crown* is a remedial measure for the professional class of academics and practitioners well versed in *Foreign Affairs* but less familiar with human affairs—that is, with the serious study of how we respond to the events and people around us.

Today's typically trained international-relations (IR) professional is immersed in specialized knowledge. Such immersion generates myopia, from a groupthink mentality to a failure to anticipate China's continued illiberalism or Vladimir Putin's massive land war against Ukraine. The IR world's embrace of technocratic policymaking shuts out the role of imagination and empathy, despite such qualities being precisely "the realm grand strategy requires, beyond calculation," as academic Charles Hill [has put it](#).

Cohen's book proceeds from an awareness of how postwar historical shifts in the IR world's educational foundations engender this blinkered perspective. It used to be a commonplace that statesmen chartered their path thanks to their knowledge of writers like Shakespeare. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill are examples, as Cohen notes. Shakespeare haunts their rhetoric and choices. No surprise that they could reach audiences high and low; no surprise that their speeches exude timelessness.

The [average American](#) of Lincoln's day had a copy of not only the King James Bible but also some Shakespeare plays. Shakespearean tropes permeated political oratory, which was then not just a spectator sport but an important social event. Shakespeare had become part of a lingua franca on both sides of the Atlantic. Cohen observes that for "Churchill, as for Lincoln, Shakespeare taught not only truths about human nature but the art of rhetoric, the craft of persuasive speech essential to all politics, but particularly democratic politics."

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky offers another, more contemporary, example. Zelensky's awareness of rhetoric, and of how sartorial style, mannerisms, and setting can craft persuasive political speech, mark him in Cohen's estimation as the rare contemporary leader in the Shakespearean mold. But Zelensky was no specialist in IR theory. His professional background is in drama.

That the underestimated Zelensky has so far succeeded in galvanizing a worldwide audience via his persuasive speech offers some comfort to those worried about the consequences of diminishing cultural literacy. But American partisan theatrics suggest the Ukrainian leader may be an exception that proves the rule. Does an increasing ignorance of human affairs explain the dearth of rhetorically skilled U.S. politicians? Are the persuasive debilities of today's leaders a symptom or a cause of their inability to govern? [Aristotle](#) observed that what renders human beings political animals is precisely communicated

speech about what is just and unjust, good and right; oratory, at least in the view of the American [Founders](#), formed the necessary foreground for the project of self-government. If our present leaders no longer attempt to practice that essential element of political life, do they even comprehend what politics is?

The revelation in February 2022 that Zelensky was a serious and capable leader was truly dramatic. It happened on the most awesome of the statesman's stages—war. Russia's invasion was a clarifying moment for the world's politicians about the state of the world outside their conferences, theories, and textbooks. Another such moment came in Hamas's grotesque invasion of Israel on October 7, 2023.

In classical drama, sudden thunderclap moments of clarity about the self or a particular situation are called *anagnorisis*. Anagnorisis has been considered an essential element of proper drama since Aristotle wrote the *Poetics*. Such moments unfold before the spectator throughout Shakespeare's plays, which is why a play can “catch the conscience of [a] king,” not to mention a modern politico.

Cohen delights in the device. As he recounts, he experienced his own anagnorisis watching a Folger Theater production of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. There, he recognized a phenomenon he'd encountered in the halls of power: once-great leaders who had long since passed their expiration dates but lacked the awareness to know it. Having been unexpectedly dismissed by his king, Cardinal Wolsey reflects to Thomas Cromwell on the sudden revelation that he had ventured “far beyond [his] depth” after having long ventured “in a sea of glory.” Wolsey now sees that the only thing left for him is the “mercy / Of a rude stream, that must for ever hide me,” and hence the famous lines:

Farewell? A long farewell, to all my greatness.
This is the state of man: to-day he puts forth
The tender leaves of hopes; to-morrow blossoms,
And bears his blushing honours thick upon him;
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost,
And, when he thinks, good easy man, full surely
His greatness is a-ripening, nips his root,
And then he falls, as I do.

Few things are sadder in Washington, Cohen writes, than out-of-touch former officials demanding to be considered essential to current policymaking. He recalls events “where the once powerful and famous can be seen sitting alone,” describing “erstwhile supplicants and sycophants no longer needing them, and a new generation simply ignorant of who they once were.” Not all go as mad as King Lear. But such former officials grow oblivious to the fact that while spectators watch politics, the spectators only ever see the current actors—even if, “as [in a theatre](#), the eyes of men, after a well-graced actor leaves the stage, are idly

bent on him that enters next.” There is drama in politics, but politics as theater is the “profound metaphor” that Shakespeare brings to the study of the workings of power that Cohen examines.

Politics and power play out on a grand stage. That is intoxicating. Politics, Cohen finds,

can be understood as a kind of theatrical production, in which all the components of stagecraft can be found. Successful politicians have always chosen their stages. Think, for example, of the Versailles conference in 1919, placed in the Hall of Mirrors, a scene of French glory and humiliation (there Bismarck inaugurated the German Empire after the Franco-Prussian war). But stages need not be magnificent. . . . What matters is how the troupe makes them work. The bareness of the Elizabethan stage—a few props, little more—allowed Shakespeare’s actors to fill it with audience members’ imaginations, inducing them to conjure up castles and battlefields, storm-wracked ships and desert islands.

Those in power employ more than cinematic magic to enhance their own images and to damage their enemies. They can use charisma and personal magnetism. Or they can use such “magical thinking” as self-deception, from which many recent U.S. presidents have suffered. Toward the end of the book, Cohen points out “that power has a dimension beyond rational calculation.” “Inseparable from magic,” power can “bring to bear forces beyond the ken of mere mortals.” This reinforces the theater-qualities of power—“setting, costuming, voice, and all the other tools of theatricality; when it works, even as an entertainment, it shatters one’s expectations about what is possible.”

In Shakespeare’s dramas about power, the crafty high and mighty leader is far from impervious to the farce and delusion that allegedly seduces the masses. Instead, tavern keepers in dirty London alleyways, crude porters, rude mechanicals, and court jesters often have a more realistic appraisal of the limits of their political communities than kings or dukes. Cohen considers the “sense of enchantment” that can “pervad[e] our lives, even in supposedly rational societies.” He connects these with more modern rhetorical moments like John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address. But it’s possible that Shakespeare wanted observers to recognize that it was not the people but their leaders who are more susceptible to the enchantment of their own selves. Perhaps this weakness blinds them to the reality of the spectators in whose name they are supposed to govern and, eventually, to the existence of the stage at all. The resulting blindness manifests clearly in their loss of sensitivity to how to match their deeds to their words, to the political moment, and to their audience.

The theater of politics cannot escape an important reality. Power can only be truly exercised in a society that consists of more than one person. For such a polity to exist, speech must embody the values of deliberation and communication. Shakespeare’s awareness of the kinship of theater and politics is nowhere

more apparent than when he supplies this *logos* to his audience, explaining the necessity of marrying deeds to words in an argument about how rulers ought to rule.

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