

# Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance

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Michael Booth

# Shakespeare and Conceptual Blending

Cognition, Creativity, Criticism

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*For Mark W. Booth*  
*“Venisti tandem, tuaque exspectata parenti vicit iter durum pietas?”*

## FOREWORD

Artists are cognitive scientists in the wild, doing the work to make visible to us features and problems of cognition that we would otherwise not notice. The human mind is not only not built to look into its own workings; it is mostly built *not* to look into them. Vision, for example, is astonishingly complicated. Fifty percent of the neocortex is implicated in it. But consciously, unless something goes terribly wrong, we do not even notice that we are doing any work to see, much less what work we are doing. It is the same for higher-order human operations.

Conceptual blending is a capacity shared by all normal human beings for perhaps the last fifty thousand years, and it is indispensable; it has given us advanced tool use, social cognition, art, music, religion, language, law, scientific discovery, mathematical insight, fashion, and so on. It comes automatically with any cognitively modern brain, is not costly, and is constantly at work. It helps us create mentally tractable concepts that we can use to understand ranges of conception that would otherwise be intractable. Memory and imagination, which may feel like open windows through which the past and future simply come to us, are in fact produced at each moment by the biological functionality we have for thinking, and blending is part of what allows our here-and-now minds, astonishingly, to arch broadly over space, time, causation, and agency.

Consider our concept of *the day*.

There are infinitely many days we could think about, and they all have a different structure. Our standard way to handle this diversity of passing days is to blend them mentally into one day that *repeats*, the cyclic day.

We make unconscious selections for this blend. We do not, for example, project to the blend *the date* for any of the days—the cyclic day has no specific date—but we create structure for it that is not in any of the inputs, namely this property of repeating. No day repeats. No midnight *comes around again*. But the cyclic day repeats. Referring to the cyclic day blend, we can say “it is time for my *morning coffee*” or “this park closes *at dusk*” or “when afternoon comes around again, we’ll go for a sail.” No one notices that the cyclic day is a conceptual blend. It is a crucial product of blending that seems to us given, straightforward, obvious, true, not a product of invention at all.

But now look at Shakespeare, where we often see blends that we can recognize as blends. When Macbeth broods upon “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,” he is doing the unusual and unsettling work of unpacking the cyclic day—first to produce a sense of *getting nowhere*, and then to highlight the uncomfortable truth that every person’s days, however slowly they pass, are numbered. They are not reiterations of a timeless state of being; they are drips from a bucket. When he concludes that “All our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death,” he is imaginatively blending his own life, his own chain of yesterdays, with the sequence of days that have led others to annihilation. Shakespeare walks us through details of a given blend, bringing onstage operations of the mind and interesting questions about them, both philosophical and scientific, that we otherwise would have been disinclined to notice. These blends often provide striking and useful new ways of understanding things. In Sonnet 3, Shakespeare writes,

Look in thy glass and tell the face thou viewest,  
Now is the time that face should form another,  
Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,  
Thou dost beguile the world, unless some mother.

“Unless” is a word I do not know in English aside from this passage. I have no conceptual frame for “unbless.” I cannot think of a specific example from history of “unblessing.” What is it? How do we understand it? The answer is that we understand it as a conceptual blend. Two futures, or two future selves, are constructed for the addressee, who is choosing whether to become a father. In one future, he has a child, and in the other, he does not. The counterfactuality between these futures precipitates new material for our idea of the present. In one case, there

is a woman whose future self includes the role of mother. If the other future is contemplated, she “no longer” has that role. *Blessed* with a child in one future, she is blessed in advance in a present where procreation is chosen. But there is a potential future derived from a present with no procreation, one in which the woman is “deprived” of that future. The friend’s choosing not to procreate is now an action by him of *unblessing* that woman, although we do not know who she is, and perhaps indeed neither the man nor the woman knows who she is, or that she has been unblessed. We all make blends like this all the time, but almost never notice them. Shakespeare routinely makes remarkable blends, useful for conceptualization across space, time, causation, and agency, and, moreover, *helps us see what is going on when we blend*. He is not only a great artist, a spectacularly creative blender; he is an exceptional investigator of cognition.

Now Michael Booth, in this book, gives us a persuasive and highly illuminating analysis of Shakespeare as a creator of conceptual blends and as a particularly perceptive and sensitive inquirer into the nature of blending. This superb work on Shakespearean blending in the creation of stories and poetic language, focusing on the domain of *literary* artistry, neatly complements Amy Cook’s influential work on Shakespearean blending in stage performance. Writing in a way that is accessible to both the literary scholar and the cognitive scientist, Booth shines a useful light on cognitive operations that are, as I have said, universal, but he devotes special attention to some particular ways in which these can yield results that we regard as exceptional, creative art.

Shakespeare is a gold standard for discussions of meaning and interpretation, and has thus offered a touchstone for cognitive linguistics from the very beginnings of the field. A book that George Lakoff and I published on metaphor in 1989, *More Than Cool Reason*, takes its title from one of the passages, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where Shakespeare is at his most explicitly reflective about the processes of the imagination, as he knew them:

### HERMIA

Methinks I see these things with parted eye,/ When every thing seems double.

...



## THESEUS

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
 Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend  
 More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
 The lunatic, the lover and the poet  
 Are of imagination all compact [*formed, composed*].  
 ...The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,  
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;  
 And as imagination bodies forth  
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen  
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing  
 A local habitation and a name.  
 Such tricks hath strong imagination,  
 That if it would but apprehend some joy,  
 It comprehends some bringer of that joy;  
 Or in the night, imagining some fear,  
 How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

## HIPPOLYTA

But all the story of the night told over,  
 And all their minds transfigured so together,  
 More witnesseth than fancy's images  
 And grows to something of great constancy;  
 But, howsoever, strange and admirable.

We who study language, the mind, and the creative human imagination have always known that Shakespeare had a great deal to say about these matters, both directly and indirectly, and we have regularly returned to his works as to a wellspring, for inspiration and for illustration.

Michael Booth's fine, encompassing new study is a timely and welcome contribution to the advancing intellectual enterprise of cognitive linguistics, as well as to Shakespeare studies. Demonstrating the centrality of conceptual blending to Shakespeare's art, Booth shows not one but many ways in which an awareness of it can inform and invigorate the study of literature. This is a highly felicitous blend of cognitive theory and literary reading. A major achievement.

Mark Turner

## SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Noam Chomsky started a revolution in human self-understanding and reshaped the intellectual landscape to this day by showing how all languages have deep features in common. Gone—or least retreating—is the idea that the mind is a blank slate. In its wake, fierce debates have broken out about what the mind is and how it works. At stake are some of the most urgent questions facing researchers today: questions about the relationship between brain, mind, and culture; about how human universals express themselves in individual minds and lives; about reason, consciousness, and emotions; about where cultures get their values and how those values fit our underlying predispositions.

It is no secret that most humanists have held fast to the idea that the mind is a blank slate. Not only has this metaphor been an article of intellectual faith, it has also underwritten a passionate moral agenda. If human beings have no inherent qualities, our political and social systems are contingent rather than fixed. Intellectuals might be able to play an important role in exposing the byways of power and bringing about a fairer world. But evidence is rapidly accumulating that humans are born with an elaborate cognitive architecture. The number of our innate qualities is staggering; human cognition is heavily constrained by genes and by our evolutionary past. It is now known that we are born with several core concepts and a capacity for developing a much larger number of cognitive capabilities under ecological pressure.

Beyond that bold headline, however, the story gets murkier. Each of the mind sciences is filled with dissonant debates of its own. In

her magisterial investigation into the origin of concepts, Susan Carey writes that her goal "is to demonstrate that the disciplines of cognitive science now have the empirical and theoretical tools to turn age-old philosophical dilemmas into relatively straightforward problems." Notice her sense of being on the verge rather than on some well-marked path. The terrain ahead is still unmapped. But notice, too, her sense that scientific methods will eventually transform fuzzy questions into testable ones.

How brave, then, are language and performance scholars who, driven by their passion to understand how the mind works, seek to explore this new terrain? Brave, but increasingly in good company. The Modern Language Association discussion group on cognitive approaches to literature has grown exponentially in the last decade. And sessions in cognition and performance at the American Society for Theatre Research are flourishing. Many scholars are fascinated by what cognitive approaches might have to say about the arts. They recognize that this orientation to literature and performance promises more than just another "ism." Unlike the theories of the last century, the mind sciences offer no central authority, no revered group of texts that disclose a pathway to the authorized truth. Indeed, cognitive approaches to the arts barely fit under one broad tent. Language processing, reader and spectator response, pragmatics, embodiment, conceptual blending, discourse analysis, empathy, performativity, and narrative theory, not to mention the energetic field of biocultural evolution, are all arenas with lively cognitive debates.

Cognitive approaches are unified by two ideas: The first is that to understand the arts we need to understand psychology. Humanists have uncontroversially embraced this idea for decades, as their ongoing fascination with the now largely discredited theory of psychoanalysis suggests. Now that psychology has undergone its empiricist revolution, literary and performance scholars should rejoice in the fact that our psychological claims are on firmer footing. Second is the idea that scholarship in this field should be generally empirical, falsifiable, and open to correction by new evidence and better theories—as are the sciences themselves. Of course this epistemological admission means that many of the truth claims of the books in our series will eventually be destabilized and perhaps proven false. But this is as it should be. As we broaden our understanding of cognition and the arts, better science should produce

more rigorous ideas and insights about literature and performance. In this spirit, we celebrate the earlier books in our series that have cut a path for our emerging field and look forward to new explorations in the future.

Pittsburgh, PA, USA  
Stanford, CA, USA

Bruce McConachie  
Blakey Vermeule

## PREFACE

This book is written for anyone who is interested in Shakespeare and in how the mind works; like the First Folio that Shakespeare's friends began assembling four hundred years ago, it is addressed "To the great Variety of Readers." It will mainly be of interest to those who already have, or who are gaining, familiarity with Shakespeare's work—scholars and students of Shakespeare. It is not, though, meant to be narrowly academic.

I first encountered Fauconnier and Turner's theory of Mental Spaces, the groundwork from which they developed the theory of conceptual blending discussed here, when I was studying a contemporary of Shakespeare's: the scientist, mathematician and linguist Thomas Harriot. Harriot's intellectual accomplishments were so strikingly varied—he was the first Englishman known to have learned a Native American language, and also the first English algebraist—that I felt he really needed to be considered as a unique, *thinking* individual, rather than simply as someone whose activities illustrated the great movements or ideologies of his time, even though the latter approach was then the prevailing one in literary studies. Contemplation of Harriot's role as an Algonquian-language interpreter turned my attention to current ideas in the academic field of linguistics, and specifically the aforementioned Mental Spaces model, which I found extremely useful for bringing together the Algonquian and algebraic facets of Harriot's work.

As a student of English literature who was drawn to consider such matters, I was fortunate to have the opportunity of obtaining an Andrew

W. Mellon postdoctoral fellowship, for 2006–2008, through the John B. Hurford Center for the Arts and Humanities at Haverford College; this fellowship enabled me to combine my new, deepening interest in cognitive linguistics with my longstanding interest in Shakespeare, and ultimately to convene an interdisciplinary symposium on “Shakespeare and the Blending Mind,” a conversation among scholars in these two fields. The present book was beginning to take shape then, as a long-term vision, which would require several more years of study, teaching and writing to be fully realized. I am deeply grateful to the symposium participants, to the Humanities Center, to Haverford and to the Mellon Foundation.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

Michael Booth

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I would also like to thank the participants, many of whom are cited in these pages, in several cognitive-critical discussions held in Dallas, Pittsburgh, St. Louis and Paris, and on the campuses of Haverford College and Harvard University.

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