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## Shakespeare and Conceptual Blending: Cognition, Creativity, Criticism (Book Review)

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## Shakespeare and Conceptual Blending: Cognition, Creativity, Criticism (Book Review)

### Abstract

Reviewed title: *Shakespeare and Conceptual Blending: Cognition, Creativity, Criticism* by Michael Booth. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 257 pp. ISBN: 9783319621869.

### Keywords

book review, Shakespeare and Conceptual Blending, cognition, creativity, criticism, Michael Booth

### Comments

Online access:

<http://sites.bu.edu/impact/previous-issues/impact-winter-2019/book-review-booth-michael-shakespeare-and-conceptual-blending-cognition-creativity-criticism/>

# BOOK REVIEW: SHAKESPEARE AND CONCEPTUAL BLENDING: COGNITION, CREATIVITY, CRITICISM

**Book Review: Booth, Michael. *Shakespeare and Conceptual Blending: Cognition, Creativity, Criticism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 257 pp. ISBN (hardcover): 978-3-319-62186-9.**

Of all the interdisciplinary projects one could imagine undertaking, the union of Shakespeare studies and cognitive science might be one of the most natural. Indeed, critical fascination with Shakespeare's mind predates by centuries the existence of cognitive science as a field of study, so it makes sense not only that cognitive science can help us understand Shakespeare's works better, but also that Shakespeare's works can illuminate the cognitive processes implicit in both the shaping of meaning as a writer and the apprehending of meaning as a reader. Within cognitive science, Giles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's *conceptual blending*, the analysis of how the mind combines diverse elements to find new insights and fuller meaning, seems almost to be a description of the process of reading literature, so it is a particularly fruitful lens for examining Shakespeare. Michael Booth's *Shakespeare and Conceptual Blending* is, thus, itself a blend, using the insights, terminology, and methods of conceptual blending to explore the works and, to a lesser degree, the creative processes of Shakespeare. His project is ambitious in its aims and scope, covering all the plays—as well as many of the sonnets and other poems—in its three core chapters, all in the interest of pursuing “what is intellectually rewarding in [Shakespeare's] works ... to better understand the workings of thought in general, and vice versa” (230).

Rather than taking an approach that covers Shakespeare sequentially or in terms of specific aspects of conceptual blending, Booth arranges his material by loose designations of plot, wit, and poetry as distinct literary elements that evince conceptual blending in different ways. After an introduction explaining the terminology and framework of conceptual blending, Booth takes on Shakespeare's “stories,” which he rightly identifies as often

underappreciated in literary studies other than source analysis. His work in this chapter serves as an engaging review of previous work on Shakespeare's source integration, with a new conceptual framework to consider how the plays' layers function for audiences. Booth's most in-depth analysis in the chapter is an exploration of how *Cymbeline* serves as a blend of all Shakespeare's own earlier blended plots, considering both the links that Shakespeare establishes and the cognitive demands that these make on audiences. Booth's exploration of the plot strands Shakespeare interwove in his plays is rich material, and the chapter should prompt other scholars to explore more deeply how concepts like *frame clash*, in which seemingly irreconcilable plot lines are conjoined, might throw new light on the plotting, audience experience, and dramaturgy of blended plays, such as both parts of *Henry IV*. In his next chapter, on Shakespeare's wit, Booth borrows terms from conceptual blending to provide a nuanced way to appreciate Shakespeare's verbal play in the ironies and malapropisms of his characters. Although dissecting the way a joke works is always a dangerous prospect, Booth's emphases on both verbal and physical humor—the use of objects and the bodily actions of performers—provide useful insights for performers as well as critics interested in how comedy works.

Perhaps Booth's most engaging work comes in his third focal point, which is also his most thorough and longest chapter. Under the heading of poetry, Booth explores the cognitive implications of everything from Shakespeare's use of classical schemes and tropes to the way in which rhyme produces cognitive connections and creates multiple frames of reference within the sonnets. In this chapter, Booth offers some of his most insightful close reading and his most effective blending, applying cognitive terminology to traditional literary terms in order not only to consider *how* literary elements work in the mind but also to provide a complex reading of the text itself. In his thoroughgoing exploration of a short passage from *The Tempest* in which Gonzalo reports with more optimism than honesty on Ferdinand's likely survival of the shipwreck, Booth considers the "richness of figuration" in the short speech. He finds and analyzes personification, hyperbaton, metaphor, paradox, metonymy, catachresis, and epithet, all traditional aspects of literary study that Booth suggests literature "teachers delight in applying ... with precision" (121). However, Booth insists that such labels are not ends in themselves, so he moves on to

explore them as cognitive constructs, providing “a comprehensive account of the mental processes behind figuration” (121). In offering such a powerful and in-depth reading, Booth makes clear the promise of conceptual blending as a means of literary criticism, finding layers of characterization and imagery in the passage that create a whole that is both more complex and compelling than its intricate parts.

Passages such as this in Booth’s book indicate the great power and insight cognitive approaches might offer to literary study, but they also indicate how close his “new” approach to literary analysis using conceptual blending is to traditional literary studies. Booth’s critical emphases show a debt to less Theory-driven critics; in addition to his extensive use of the work of cognitive theorists Fauconnier and Turner, his common references to literary critics are figures like William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, Helen Vendler, and Frank Kermode. Booth is not ignorant of the proximity of his own approach to traditional close reading: he overtly addresses the issue in his concluding chapter. Although he is careful not to alienate historicists and post-structuralists, he claims that applying blend theory to literary criticism might inspire critics “more inclined to discuss metaphor, paradox, ambiguity, imagery etc., with a new confidence in the importance of such phenomena” (230). Although such critics may not feel that they need justification from cognitive theories, Booth’s work does, at least, provide another set of terminology to explore and appreciate the ways in which we process meaning in literary texts.

For all its potential in applying cognitive theory to Shakespeare, Booth’s book is not perfect. Booth occasionally treats the terminology of conceptual blending as its own end rather than using it to find new insight into Shakespeare’s works, and he sometimes errs in apparent uncertainty about whether he is writing a broad survey or a detailed analysis, leaving some sections of the book feeling simultaneously overly long and yet not fully developed. However, it is an engaging read that opens up what promises to be a rich interdisciplinary field not only for analysis by literary critics but also for consideration of cognition and reading as a whole. Thus, in his work in the book, Booth challenges readers and critics “not to exalt Shakespeare’s creativity above the reader’s, but to examine their interdependence” (13). It is this interdependence of author and reader that Booth succeeds

in articulating in the work, and it provides an opening for much greater exploration, in Shakespeare studies and beyond.