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“Bodied Forth:” conceptual blending and gesture in Shakespeare

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. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.)

The study of linguistic processing – and the embodied and embedded thinking that it reflects and shapes – offers a tremendous tool to those of us wanting to know how and why stories are told by bodies onstage. In this paper I will provide three examples of how conceptual blending theory and gesture research has expanded my readings of Shakespeare's plays on the page and on the stage. I will stage the connections between an edifying interpretation of *Hamlet* by the people of a West African village and the casting of Sam Shepard in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000). By going under the language we think of as literal, we can enrich our understanding of the play, illuminate our conceptual structures, and expand options for staging and embodying the play. Ophelia's death and Shepard's Ghost are both conceptual blends that deeply impact our conception of the play as a whole and a cognitive method of analysis allows for a smarter performance analysis.

Of course, research on gesture has shown persuasively that language is profoundly embodied. In the final section of my paper I will look specifically at how Shepard uses his hands to communicate with and against the language. I will also raise some methodological challenges of studying gesture onstage.

The test for me of the application of conceptual blending theory or cognitive science to products of the creative mind is not if it answers with finality some question, but rather whether or not it helps us get to the next question of interest. Conceptual blending theory and cognitive linguistics more broadly put pressure on old readings and generate future research questions. The question, then, is not what does Shakespeare mean when he says that Ophelia drowned or that theatre should be like a mirror held up to nature, but rather what further questions can we ask about *Hamlet* once we have used blending theory to explain *how* he makes his meaning?