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Review of Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory

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Mary Thomas Crane, *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001. 265 pp. ISBN 0691069921 (paper).

Reviewed by Nancy Selleck, University of Massachusetts, Lowell

Mary Thomas Crane's *Shakespeare's Brain: Reading with Cognitive Theory* makes an impressive contribution to Shakespeare scholarship as well as to the fledgling field of cognitive literary studies. Acknowledging that cognitive science is still at a "primitive" and controversial stage, she nevertheless makes a strong case for the usefulness of some of its findings about how the brain makes sense of the world, organizes experience into categories, and participates in the cultural process of language. Her use of cognitive theory focuses primarily on Shakespeare's choice of words, understood to be "shaped and constrained" by cognitive processes and structures (15). With its emphasis on the "embodied brain" as opposed to the immaterial, post-Cartesian "mind," Crane's book joins the still growing field of scholarship focusing on the body, and, more broadly, on the "material" dimensions of culture. But unlike the majority of such studies, Crane's also rejects key aspects of contemporary theory and aims to address its limitations via cognitive science. Her title is deliberately provocative, and her approach modifies the theoretical basis for asserting connections between Shakespeare's texts and their physical and social contexts. Crane is particularly interested in mapping a *reciprocal* relationship between the subject and its world—which is to say, in getting beyond the determinism of much post-structuralist criticism and reopening the question of authorial agency. For Crane, the "embodied brain" is the site where culture and biology meet to form the subject and produce texts, but it is also the locus of individual activity, both conscious and unconscious. Thus it offers a way around "the current critical impasse between those who assume an author with conscious control over the text he produces and those who assume that cultural construction leaves little or no room for authorial agency" (16). One measure of Crane's achievement with this book lies in the depth and specificity of its challenges to current thinking on both sides of that major issue.

In a highly readable theoretical introduction, Crane offers an ambitious critique of post-structural theory, analyzing in particular the shortcomings, from a cognitive perspective, of the Saussurean premises on which some key elements of Derridean, Foucauldian, and Lacanian theory rest. Whereas Saussure saw language as an autonomous system of arbitrary signs whose meaning is based on difference rather than on any extrasystemic reality, cognitive theorists see language as partly "shaped, or 'motivated,' by its origins in the neural systems of a human body as they interact with other human bodies and an environment" (11). Thus cognitive subjects "are not simply determined by the symbolic order in which they exist; instead, they shape (and are also shaped by) meanings that are determined by an interaction of the physical world, culture, and human cognitive systems" (12). Cognitive theory recognizes "the preeminence of fuzzy categories in human mental functioning" without therein finding a "complete lack of agency or a triumph of irrationality" (13); by contrast, Derridean theory betrays an underlying expectation of a logical and unified human cognition, which it keeps rediscovering as false. And whereas Saussurean formalism posits nothing "outside the text," in cognitive theory "meaning is anchored (although ambiguously and insecurely) by a three-way tether: brain, culture, discourse" (24).

Also crucial to this revised understanding of agency is a broad conception of unconscious functioning—not the Freudian or Lacanian unconscious made up of repressed thoughts and

desires, but the whole cognitive interface between the subject and its world. The fact that most of these mental processes take place out of awareness does not mean that the subject is not performing them. Thus Crane can see Shakespeare's brain as one "origin" of his texts without implying his "complete conscious control over them." She can posit "Shakespeare as an agent, conceiving of that agency as partly conscious and partly unconscious, with an unconscious component that reflects cognitive as well as affective categories" (19).

Crane's discussion suggests that properly to theorize a subject embedded in its context is not to nullify the agency of the subject, but to reconceive agency as a cooperative process, and to take the physicality of the subject quite seriously in that reconception. Thus she contrasts the Foucauldian deconstruction of the author with her own emphasis on the physical reality of the author's body, which Foucauldian materialist critics "disperse . . . into an immaterial author-function" (3-4). Without rejecting the complexity of the Foucauldian subject, she shows that the physical-spatial emphasis of cognitive theory can supplement it, addressing in particular a one-way conception of power that scholars have increasingly found inadequate in recent years. Crane argues that a more active conception of a cognitive subject that "participates in the creation of meaning as it interacts with material culture" (17) offers a more flexible theoretical framework for analyzing both the subject's role and its representation in culture, and her readings of Shakespeare often bear this out.

Less convincing is Crane's claim that a cognitive approach offers "a more radical materialism than does current Marxist theory, since it attempts to explore the literally material origins of the self" (17). Why is it any more radically materialist to consider the biological bases of cognition than to consider the social and economic conditions that surround the person? Surely the latter are as "literally material"; the difference is rather that they also lie outside the self, whereas the subject of Crane's focus—the embodied brain—belongs more properly to it. It would seem more accurate, then, to say that a cognitive approach allows a more *individually* based materialism. This may indeed be part of its appeal for Crane, for such an emphasis inflects some of her readings. In *Measure for Measure*, for instance, despite her sense that "this most preeminently cognitive play" depicts the necessity of interpersonal influence and penetration, she underplays the extent to which the play embraces that necessity. Instead, she finds it deeply resistant to such insights, seeing in the Duke an underlying "fantasy" of the "solitary 'completeness' and inviolability" of the individual (177).

This is not the only moment when Crane's specific readings seem less radical than her theoretical challenge; yet since the implications of that challenge keep unfolding with each chapter, one needn't agree with every argument to find the book compelling and valuable throughout. On the whole, Crane's approach is integrative rather than polemical, and she repeatedly throws into dialogue representatives of different disciplinary perspectives that have not yet been talking with each other. In her individual discussions of plays she brings in a wealth of cultural materials, and she manages to incorporate a wide range of critical readings of Shakespeare into her own arguments. This inclusive tendency finds a counterpart in her "cognitive" view of Shakespeare's own authorial functioning, allowing her to read the plays not as evincing particular viewpoints but as "trying out" many different possibilities. *Hamlet*, for instance, represents neither a new version of the self nor an older notion, but "a range of spatially delineated possibilities: there is, or is not, an essential self . . . that works as a stable locus of agency; this self can, or cannot, be

reliably expressed; actions do, or do not, create the self" (117). Crane's point, of course, is not simply that we can *read* both possibilities in Shakespeare's complex text, but that the play itself is a deliberate cognitive exploration of problems of human consciousness and action, and Shakespeare a kind of cognitive theorist.

Indeed, her fundamental view of the plays is that they are all cognitive investigations. Methodologically, this approach centers on an exploration of word usage. In each play she analyzes, Crane discovers a group of polysemic words that form a network of ideas around which the play is built. Generally they are words whose meanings are shifting at the time Shakespeare is writing, and the plays analyze how and why they are changing. The chapter on *Comedy of Errors*, for instance, shows that that play's emphasis on the words *house*, *home*, and *marts* signals its deep concern with the spatial orientation of the self in the context of changing conceptions of public and private spaces. In *Twelfth Night*, she elaborates the multiple forms and meanings of "suit"—its related or contradictory senses of passive conformity, willful pursuit, and dressing to display or to disguise—in relation to the characters' various modes of identity and desire. In *As You Like It*, she surveys the changing ideologies of social mobility reflected in the various uses of "villain" and "clown," connecting these also with changes in early modern theatrical practice. At the heart of *Measure for Measure* she finds a preoccupation with the word "pregnant," which for Shakespeare "named the multiple ways that bodies are penetrated by the external world and produce something—offspring, ideas, language—as a result of that penetration" (159). Starting with word use, Crane is able to take her arguments in many fruitful and interconnected directions. For instance, most of her chapters link the social and cognitive issues under discussion with some practical aspect of the theater—its staging of private and public spaces, its different types of clowns, its use of music or costumes or soliloquy. But whatever she connects them to, the groups of words both anchor and drive her complex discussions.

It is a powerful methodology, largely because it relies on the historicity of language. In Crane's hands, Shakespeare's famous preoccupation with wordplay becomes much more than a mental habit. Her arguments suggest that such wordplay is really an engagement with history—a registering and interrogating of significant social changes. It represents Shakespeare's understanding of the word as a site of cultural debate, as the material embodiment and trace of key social tensions. Shakespeare is playing not just with language, but with the social circumstances behind its changing uses.

Crane's attention to early modern language can also have implications for our own critical vocabulary. In her chapter on *The Tempest*, she argues against the critical practice of treating "discourse" as the disembodied product of abstract "power relations," a practice which she says "effaces the role of individual subjects in the production of language" (179). Arguing that *The Tempest* represents discourse as "a metaphorically based radial category with fuzzy boundaries" (178), she takes account of the way the play often links or undermines speech with a great variety of other, non-discursive sounds—music, thunder, cries of pain, etc. This chapter struck me as the most unusual and provocative of her readings, showing how a cognitive approach provokes different concerns than most current critical approaches. Her attention to the physical production of sound (as a matter of play production as well as human psychology) allows Crane to read *The Tempest* as "patently about the relationship between sound and space, about the ways

in which language creates but is also created (and disrupted) by a physical environment" (179). She cautions against analyses of "discourse" that oversimplify the issue of Prospero's control or power, suggesting instead that the play reveals "the failures of discourse to control the material world," and represents a "meditation on the difficult interrelationships between the 'natural' and the 'discursive'" (180).

In the sheer variety of issues it raises, as well as the wealth of materials and viewpoints it digests, *Shakespeare's Brain* offers much to the field of early modern cultural studies. Its interpretative arguments are always rich and subtle, and the book as a whole presents genuinely new ways of reading Shakespeare in historical context. I expect that its theoretical claims will have the most resonance for scholars both within and beyond Renaissance studies. For the book succeeds in demonstrating a more complex understanding of the subject as a socially embedded agent—an idea we need no longer take as a contradiction in terms, but can try to map in increasingly varied and nuanced relation to its political and cultural contexts.