

# *Hamlet's* Mobled Queen: The Displacement of the Figure in Contemporary Discourse, Communication, and Art

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## Abstract

The paper will focus on communication through the figures of discourse. The problem of the entanglement of the visual and the semantic is discussed extensively by Jean-François Lyotard, in his notable *Discourse, Figure*, in relation to the perception and representation of space and the role and form of the sign. According to this philosopher, the figure dominates the communication process by deconstructing the text. Both the topography of the figure and art is the result of repression processes and the subsequent discharge of libidinal energy. Art in particular is a formalism of the death drive, according to Lyotard. The figure of “the mobled queen”, the expression of a possible slip of the tongue in *Hamlet*, becomes a symbol of the distorted relationship of the visual, the semantic, the ethical, and the critical role of this in art and communication. In addition to Lyotard’s model, the possible figures of globalization will be discussed in relation to Peter Sloterdijk’s *Globes. Spheres II*.

## Keywords

*Hamlet*, mobled queen, the figure, Lyotard, contemporary philosophy, contemporary art

“But who, O! who had seen the mobled queen” (Shakespeare 1928: 1023). This perplexing question appears in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. It is pronounced during the performance of actors invited to the castle to stage Priam’s murder by Pyrrhus. Then the phrase is repeated twice: by Hamlet himself, when he interrupts the play with his exclamation of astonishment: “The mobled queen?”, and in the even more metaphorical response by Polonius: “That’s good; ‘mobled queen’ is good” (Shakespeare 1928: 1023). The phrase, as critics say, could be a result of an early editor’s mistake: It did not have a clear meaning and reference even in Shakespeare’s time. This is confirmed by Hamlet’s astonishment, which is meant to mirror the audience’s surprise over an unusual word. In some sense, “mobled” means veiled,

masked, which is confirmed by the following description of the queen:

Run barefoot up and down, threat’ning the flames  
With bisson rheum; a clout upon that head  
Where late the diadem stood; and, for a robe,  
About her lank and all o’er-teemed loins,  
A blanket, in the alarm of fear caught up (Shakespeare  
1928: 1023)

The mobled queen is a veiled figure. In other words, it is a figure of suspense, uncertainty, mystery,

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and guilt. Like a Freudian slip, it appears unexpectedly, unintentionally attracting attention due to its semantic oddity.

By pointing to some unexpected, alternative meanings contrary to our expectations, and by its threatening concealment of death, its function in the narrative is similar to that of Derrida's *différance*. In the well-known introduction to his paper *Différance*, Derrida states:

I will speak, therefore, of the letter a, this initial letter which it apparently has been necessary to insinuate, here and there, into the writing of the word difference; and to do so in the course of a writing on writing, and also of a writing within writing whose different trajectories thereby find themselves, at certain very determined points, intersecting with a kind of gross spelling mistake, a lapse in the discipline and law which regulate writing and keep it seemly. (Derrida 1982: 3)

Notably, the secretive difference between a and e carries also some mortal danger, because it is compared by Derrida to a silent tomb. If *différance* is a silent tomb which has appeared “in the course of (...) a writing within writing” or in a play within a play, the mobled queen is one as well, even more so, in the light of spelling irregularities suggested by some critics with reference to the unusual word “mobled”.

In “‘The Mobled Queen’. Samuel Harden Church Defends Line in *Hamlet* as Genuine” published in the September 22, 1913 issue of *The New York Times*, Church raises the question of early editions of *Hamlet* dating back to 1623, where the word “mobled” was replaced by “inobled”. However, as he claims, in the original 1603 edition of the play, supervised by Shakespeare himself, Polonius calls the queen “mobled”. Therefore, from the very first, the existence of this figure has been marked by conflict, a difference of opinions, a significant, meaningful misspelling. The rift at the origin seems symbolic, as in the case of *différance*. According to Derrida, the sign is a deferred presence, but in this case, it is a double negative as it marks the presence of death, a murder. In this sense,

the mobled queen would be an ironic prerequisite of a sign, since it is the true “substitution of the sign for the thing itself”, which exposes “an original missing and lost presence” (Derrida 1982: 6). The mobled queen substitutes the lost presence of the king, the dead king.

The trace of *différance* in *Hamlet* seems all the more interesting in the light of its royal connotations, as exposed by Derrida. The royalty of the Derridean *différance* is phrased in negative terms. *Différance* “governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority” (Derrida 1982: 13). Interestingly enough, Shakespeare's figure of the mobled queen sheds new light on the next stage in Derrida's argumentation:

(...) *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of kingdom. And it is always in the name of a kingdom, the past or future presence of kingdom. And it is always in the name of a kingdom that one may reproach *différance* with wishing to reign, believing that one sees it aggrandize itself with a capital letter. (Derrida 1982: 13)

This passage may offer a new perspective on the reading of *Hamlet*. What does this desire for the kingdom signify? Power, presence, Being, or in more common terms: structure and hierarchy, that is, logic and reason. The kingdom in Shakespeare is always deferred, delayed by death, successive royal murders in the never ending sequence of royal violence. The king is always temporary, easily substituted. What is constant is the libido, Lyotard would say, murderous desire for the kingdom. The desire for the kingdom, which makes each of us a king, signifies a private metaphysics, the reign of what Derrida calls “a capital letter” that is, I.

On the other hand, the queen is a universal figure of the subservient Other, who is blind, that is, mobled. Blinded by love, desire, and guilt, this figure may represent the other sex, society as such, us as

spectators, or everyone else apart from the king (who is absent). The king, the head is missing, which is represented at the level of signs by the veiled head of the queen. She is the veiled Herodias, who is guilty of incest and of the beheading of St. John the Baptist, to read *Hamlet's* plot in a Biblical light. Derrida says: “*différance* is certainly but the historical and epochal unfolding of Being or of the ontological difference. The a of *différance* marks the movement of this unfolding” (Derrida 1982: 13). The figure of the mobled queen, who discloses herself in an act of unveiling, stands for presence, for Being which borders on its opposite yet parallel pair, that is, absence, nonbeing, the dead king. The play of trace in this case is: the trace of death in the living (the veil) and the trace of living in the dead (the ghost). The intrigue includes the play of absence and presence, guilt and innocence, virtue and sin, Eros drive and Thanatos drive, visibility and invisibility, concealment and disclosure, and the private and the public, since mobled also connotes the word “mobbed”, according to some critics.

In other words, the mobled queen is a Shakespearian prefigurement of *différance*. Notably, this figure exists only through language, in dialogue, as a rhetorical figure of astonishment and accusation since “Being / speaks / always and everywhere / throughout / language” (Heidegger 1975: 52).

In the story of the deconstruction of the kingdom, linguistic figures such as the mobled queen signal the work of deconstruction in *Hamlet*. The history of the writing or spelling of this phrase is an essential part of the history of *Hamlet* readings. In this sense, *Hamlet* is, in Derrida's words, “a writing within writing whose different trajectories thereby find themselves, at certain very determined points, intersecting with a kind of gross spelling mistake, a lapse in the discipline and law which regulate writing and keep it seemly” (Derrida 1982: 3).

Moreover, in Lyotard's reading, this violation of spelling rules parallels the violation of family rules

perceived from Hamlet's perspective, marked by the murder of the father and the marriage between the mother and the uncle. “The key to mobled is mobilized” says Lyotard, elaborating further:

A mobile mother is a mother misplaced, appearing where she is not expected and not appearing where she is, *camouflée* because she slips away and *encanaillée*, prostituted, because she gave herself in violation of the intervals imposed by the rules of exchange; and moreover “insane”, since she ignores reason, the well-ordered allotment of the social fabric (...). (Lyotard 2011: 388)

Mobled itself signals and belongs to the domain of the unconscious, illogical desires. “‘Mobled’ is a fragment of the space of the primary unconscious, which came to leave its trace in the space of discourse” (Lyotard 2011: 388). Hamlet's interest in an involuntary repetition of the phrase is a symptom of a strong oedipal desire to take the place of his father and marry his mother, and, in this way, misplace and rearrange family relations. Therefore, he strongly reacts to the phrase “mobled queen”, associating it with the figure of a mobile queen or mother. The figure, in this sense, is a result of an act of semantic and libidinal misplacement. “This mismatched word performs a work of truth; it does not articulate it” (Lyotard 2011: 389). Thus, the play within the play in *Hamlet* presents the performative, not metaphorical or narrative, role of the figure in art. This has been discussed, for example, by Arthur Danto in relation to Bruce Nauman's work.

Nauman's famous print *Please Pay Attention Please* is nothing more and nothing less than a call for the audience's attention (see Figure 1). A rhetorical discontinuity, an aberration of the narrative, where a message becomes unclear, but direct, directly aimed to reach, reveal, and express the unconscious. Sometimes, it is the social public unconsciousness, as in Nauman's *Anthro/Socio* (see Figure 2). This piece presents a man's head turning on its own axis (almost like a beheaded head of the tragic Shakespearian *Macbeth* or



**Figure 1.** Bruce Nauman, *Please Pay Attention Please*, 1973.

*King Richard III*) and crying aloud: “Feed me / Eat me / Anthropology, Help me / Hurt me / Sociology”. It is a figure of the subconscious, the symbol of a victim of social or personal violence, humiliated and helpless; a strong figure that signifies the endless repetition of violence and terror throughout human history. At the same time, it is also a figure of the unconscious drives, but contrary to our expectations, it presents the domination of Thanatos over Eros. The helpless crying and rotating head recalls the dark atmosphere of Shakespearian plays, where royalty equaled death and most royal characters were murdered before the end of the play.

Some of Nauman’s other pieces, such as *One Hundred Live and Die*, could also have their origin in Shakespearian dialogues. This work is based on an absurd paradoxical playful repetition of life and death: “scream and die, young and die, old and die, cut and die, run and die, stay and die, play and die, kill and die, (...) think and die”, which may have been inspired by the famous “to be or not to be” paradox and similarly rhythmic and repetitive tragic lines related to death in *King Richard III*, such as:

Queen Margaret:  
 I had an Edward, till a Richard kill’d him;  
 I had a Harry, till a Richard kill’d him;  
 Thou hadst an Edward, till a Richard kill’d him.  
 Though hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him.  
 Duchess of York:



**Figure 2.** Bruce Nauman, *Anthro/Socio*, 1991.

I had a Richard too, and thou didst kill him;  
 I had a Rutland too, thou holp’st to kill him.  
 (*King Richard III*, IV. 40-45)

The endless repetition of death and the misery of the human condition, recurrently threatened by the drive to cruelty, is the thematic concern of Nauman’s circular rhymes. One example is *Pete and Repeat*, which is based on a repetition of a joke by a clown who recites: “Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off. Who was left? Repeat. Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence...”. The piece represents libidinal desire at work, in the form of a symptom of neurosis caused by a blocked desire, that manifests itself in a play of *différance*. As Lyotard says:

Eros and Logos then conspire to block the death drive (...) regression is interrupted and placed in a repetitive framework. The symptom is due to the emergence of a form, of a rigid framework as a compromise between the twin requirements of living and dying (...) Thus, from the very formation of its deep figure, desire comprises itself by becoming involved with what prohibits it; its surface expressions will betray in the symptom the same configuration: bound order, dotted with displacements and condensations, marks of the death drive. What constitutes the art is the submerging of this order in the element of death: zones of displacement and condensations, peppered with islets of bound order, themselves dotted with condensations and displacements. (Lyotard 2011: 384)

The mobled queen is an equally contradictory

figure of death drive displacement, a phrase that calls attention to itself by the very virtue of its oddity. Lyotard notes also that the word *mobled* connotes “motley, or an incongruous mixture, and more specifically, the jester’s outfit: to wear motley is to play the fool” (Lyotard 2011: 388). The traditional function of the fool is truth telling, subversion, and derision. The *mobled* queen reveals the true oedipal desire of her son to subvert the family relations. Moreover, as Lyotard states: “Like the ‘fools’ clad in a patchwork of bits and pieces, this mismatched word performs a work of truth, it does not articulate it” (Lyotard 2011: 387-388). The paradoxical and displaced figure of the fool may offer an insight into the social unconscious and the existential truth of the human condition.

A similar figure reoccurs in the famous performance of Joseph Beuys, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, during which the artist, with his head coated in honey and gold leaf, presented a monologue on art and life to a dead hare. Last but not least, the veiled or *mobled* head of the queen signifies the hooded head of the public executioner.

An artwork is an effect of libidinal desire, more on the side of Thanatos than on the side of Eros and Logos. Lyotard finds the very process of therapeutic psychoanalysis somehow similar to art making in stimulating the free flow of energy. Contrary to Freud’s initial intuition, however, Lyotard does not consider artistic creation in terms of sublimation processes:

This is not a matter of sublimation, but of the strength to descend toward the death drive. (...) the artwork does not fulfill desire; it unfulfills (it) (...) Pleasure and death are cleaved in the artwork: its formalism is not the sign of the mind, but of the death drive. (Lyotard 2011: 386-387)

Therefore, true art is always an outcome of the fascination with the death drive, in which “the operations of desire could already be glimpsed” (Lyotard 2011: 387).

Interestingly, Lyotard opposes figure to discourse. In this opposition, discourse stands for the realistic use of language, realistic representation, and a clear reference system. This is contrasted by the space of dislocation, free play, and free energy flow, less restricted and not repressed by Eros and Logos. Therefore, the artwork offers the symptom of its own free space of dispossession to take form and resonate. The space of the figure, and of the artwork, is suspended yet oscillating, open to mobility. Mobility is always made possible by a certain surplus of empty space. On the page, this mobility makes use of blanks, gaps, and empty spaces. The empty semantic space, on the other hand, is a necessary prerequisite of art. “The artwork takes shape in an empty space” (Lyotard 2011: 358), and this is also conceptually empty as a true work of art distances itself from the established tradition and patterns. Lyotard further develops this diagnosis of art later in his famous *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In the appendix of this work, the concept of the unrepresentable and experimental genius of art draws on Kant’s definition of art based on novelty and originality. A genius artist has to reinvent and reframe the existing art system time and again, by inventing and introducing a new rule that will, at the same time, totally restructure and displace all the existing relations, hierarchies, and rules. Therefore, the empty space above, below, and inside each figure in an artwork is essential, so that it can be put in motion, reinvented.

In a simplified version presented at first by Freud and criticized by Lyotard, the figure, in a text or a work of art, is an effect of phantasy work (“phantasy is what produces the figural effects in the text—transgressions to the norms of signification”) (Lyotard 2011: 356). The artwork would be, therefore, equal to a symptom that could serve as an evidence in a psychoanalytical treatment. In Lyotard’s hypothesis, in the figure, the form suspends desire from reaching the final level of fulfillment; it keeps the desire at the level of “unfulfillment” with no gratification. The

artwork is a mobile transitory object, a mobled queen, whose status, meaning, and function is never finally determined.

The same preference for dynamic elements, which in turn may set our cognitive faculties (reason and understanding) in motion, is already visible in Kant. The role of motion as a potential constituent element for the *a priori* categories of time and space is indeed emphasized by Kant, whose thought increasingly influenced the late writings of Lyotard. The repercussions and echoes of the hypothesis of the primacy of motion to the categories of time and space are evident in Derrida's emphasis of the archaic principle of differentiation, which even precedes the distinction between presence and absence. The significance of motion for Kant's theory of faculties was also noted by Heidegger in his *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, later quoted and discussed by Erman Kaplama.

I deliberately call attention to the phenomena of transition, change, alteration, modification, motion, and happening. When Kant in the transcendental aesthetic excludes the motion of objects, the change of place etc., this must not gloss over the fact that, according to the Kantian interpretation of these phenomena, in the end motion—understood more originally—has a far more radical function in the entirety of ontology than space and time. (Heidegger 1997: 53)

In other words, it is motion, mobility observed and experienced by the human mind, that results in the apprehension of reality through the categories of time and space. Motion also constitutes the essence of Heidegger's concept of Being and becoming. In other words, the king's reign of constancy and stability is overthrown. The king is dead, and absent. Power now belongs to the figure of the mobled or mobile queen. This is a dynamic reading of *Hamlet*. The hierarchical domination of the principle of movement and mobility is also confirmed by Kaplama. Below is his analysis of the role of dynamism in Kant's thought:

Kant finally concedes that the principle of motion

is a separate principle that governs the law of the continuity of change both in empirical science and rational thought, thus preceding and determining the intuitions of time and space (Kaplama 2014: 117).

The dependency of time and space on movement is also confirmed by the recent experiments on gravitation in contemporary physics, he claims further.

Similarly, Lyotard's figure is activated in the process of reading and communicating. In *Discourse, Figure*, he gives an example of the role of typography in *Illustrations*, the book on photography of the Rocky Mountains by Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. The figure-form presented on each page of the book is compared to the water surface that allows the floating and fluctuation of its elements, their reflections, and the mutual influence. The space in between, the blank, or the depth of water, and its phantasy-storing potential seem more important for the overall figure and its meaning than the actual present elements. The existing image and text form certain meaningful constellations, which however retract to make space for the intervals of emptiness, waiting for a new wave of potential meaning to come. The metaphor of the sea concerns the fluctuations and mobility of meaning described on the back cover of *Illustrations* and quoted by Lyotard.

Illustrations  
of missing images, which in turn would be  
Illustrations  
of missing texts, which in turn would be their  
Illustrations

The book is like the sand, a figure of a blank, and a shape of the missing wave reflecting the displaced and unpredictable meaning that arises. The photographs do not illustrate, and they "stage and represent the Rockies in a phantasmatic spectacle, occupying the forbidden space between the latent and the manifest" (Lyotard 2011: 376). Lyotard stresses the role of the processes of displacement, substitution, and condensation that are at work both in the

figure-text and the figure-images:

Just as the water's undulations can be perceived with much greater accuracy thanks to the distortions they provoke on the surface of the bound set of logs, so the linguistic consistency maintained in the text allows the reader to feel the undercurrents that sway the unwritten layers upholding the logs of language. (Lyotard 2011: 376)

The *Illustrations* marks and illustrates the "unfulfillment" of desire. The effects of mobility of lettering, blanks, and images block phantasizing and disrupt the connection between the signifier and the signified. Nevertheless, through a critical work of art, the libido can recreate "the difference that the phantasy blocks and flattens into opposition and repetition, that is, into symptom, and incorporates this difference into itself in its internal space" (Lyotard 2011: 377).

## CONCLUSIONS

In the conclusion, the author would like to point to the displacements in the figure of totality that is globalization, according to Peter Sloterdijk, who states that "'mankind' is by no means constituted by the libido of forming a total organization and producing the necessary media for it" (Sloterdijk 2014: 941). However, utopian figures of universal sources of all knowledge, archives, or encyclopedia that would contain the records of all scientific wisdom available at a certain time, have been proposed already by French Enlightenment thinkers. One might say that this project has been completed with the emergence of Internet globally, but many arguments may be raised against such simplification. Not only were the quality criteria obviously unmet, the project also began and ended with displacement. The phantasm of a universal encyclopedia was displaced by the shadow of the Tower of Babel. The unimaginable diversity of 6,700 authentic human languages and cultures related to them must be taken into account, Sloterdijk claims.

The discovery of this diversity seems to finally confirm the work of the Derridian *différance*.

Moreover, in the age of globalization, our traditional space-related habits of being and dwelling have also been challenged dramatically: "the immunological construction of political-ethnic (region-bound—EB) identity has been set in motion" (Sloterdijk 2014: 953). The connections between places and people, identities and selves have been transformed and deconstructed. Contemporary topography includes selves without a place and places without a self. It is inevitable that future societies will have to "seek their *modus vivendi* somewhere between the poles" (Sloterdijk 2014: 953) of extreme positions or construct identities or communities that are movement-determined rather than territory-determined, open to change and transition, but also somehow inclined to disloyalty and the loosening of interpersonal ties and relationships that have now become only temporary. In contemporary times as well, the king is clearly dead. What is left is the queen—an unclear figure of instability, mobility, unfaithfulness, and transformation.

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