

## ὦ πόποι: The Semantics of Surprise in Homeric Epic

Surprise is a complex, second order emotional experience rising out of a perceived contradiction between an experienced event and a belief or set of beliefs about that event. Donald Davidson (1982: 326) has argued that surprise requires not only a belief, but a belief about a belief:

Suppose I believe there is a coin in my pocket. I empty my pocket and find no coin. I am surprised. Clearly enough I could not be surprised (though I could be startled) if I did not have beliefs in the first place. And perhaps it is equally clear that having a belief, at least one of the sort I have taken for my example, entails the possibility of surprise. If I believe I have a coin in my pocket, something might happen that would change my mind. But surprise involves a further step. It is not enough that I first believe there is a coin in my pocket, and after emptying my pocket I no longer have this belief. Surprise requires that I be aware of a contrast between what I did believe and what I come to believe. Such awareness ... is a belief about a belief.

Moments of surprise open up a window into a person's conceptual system. I feel surprise because I am faced with an event that forces me to realize what I thought was incorrect; now I must reconcile what I now observe with my system of beliefs more generally. In other words, surprise promotes metacognition: it pushes me to think about how I think and reveals my own previously unexplored inner depths to myself. Surprise presents itself as a rupture as my expectations are torn asunder.

I am particularly interested in surprise in Homeric epic for the insight it offers into the psychology of its characters. I propose examining the representation of characters experiencing

surprise through the semantic descriptors that accompany such scenes. Homeric surprise is generally signaled by the PIE root *\*d<sup>h</sup>emb<sup>h</sup>-* (θηπ-/ταφ-) which indicates ‘be dazed, astounded, surprised, etc.’ (Szemerényi 1954, Barton 1993, Forte 2019: 47-8): the perfect τέθηπα (*Il.* 4x, *Od.* 3x), pluperfect ἐτεθήπεα (*Od.* 6.166), imperfect (ἐ-)θάμβεον (*Od.* 3x, *h. Hom.* 3.135), aorist (ἐ-)θάμβησα (*Il.* 7x, *Od.* 3x), aorist participles ταφών (*Il.* 6x, *Od.* 16.12) and θαμβήσαντ- (*Od.* 1.360 = 20.354, 24.1-1, *h. Hom.* 2.15), and nouns θάμβος (*Il.* 4x, *Od.* 2x) and τάφος (*Od.* 3x). This family offers “an onomatopoeic representation of a beating sound” (Forte 2019: 48), suggesting that surprise appears as something that strikes us from outside; even beyond Homeric epic “surprise” is usually denoted by ἔκπληξις, a noun derived from another verb that means ‘to strike,’ πλάττειν.

In addition to the *\*d<sup>h</sup>emb<sup>h</sup>-f* family, scenes where a character expresses surprise are marked with the interjection ὦ πόποι. As an example, Thoas, son of Andraimon and Aitolian ally of the Greeks, expresses surprise when he sees Hector standing again (*Il.* 15.286-9):

ὦ πόποι ἦ μέγα θαῦμα τόδ' ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ὀρῶμαι,  
οἷον δ' αὖτ' ἐξαῦτις ἀνέστη κῆρας ἀλύξας  
Ἔκτωρ· ἦ θήν μιν μάλα ἔλπετο θυμὸς ἐκάστου  
χερσὶν ὑπ' Αἴαντος θανέειν Τελαμωνιάδαο.

Oh surprise, truly I am looking upon this great marvel with my own eyes!  
How once again, having alluded death he stands up again,  
Hector. Truly, I believe, each man’s *thumos* very much expected  
that he had died at the hands of Telemonian Ajax.

After Ajax toppled Hector with a giant stone, no one anticipated (ἔλπετο, 15.288) Hector would survive and stand up again (αὐτ' ἐξαῦτις ἀνέστη κῆρας ἀλύξας, 15.287), and yet there he stands! A dead man walking! We observe Thoas' surprise both with ὦ πόποι as well as ἦ μέγα θαῦμα (15.286). Similarly, Achilles feels shock at seeing Lycaon, a man he formerly captured and ransomed overseas, approaching him once again in supplication (*Il.* 21.53-59). The passage pairs ὦ πόποι with ἦ μέγα θαῦμα (21.53) and the participle ὀχθήσας which Achilles' discomfort at the experience of seeing that “great-hearted Trojans, the very men I myself have slayed, are standing up again out of the darkness and gloom” (Τρῶες μεγαλήτορες οὓς περ ἔπεφνον | αὐτίς ἀναστήσονται ὑπὸ ζόφου ἠερόεντος, 21.55-56).

I will examine scenes in which characters exclaim ὦ πόποι and describe the semantic field of ‘surprise’ as characters face events that force them to reconsider their beliefs. In their confusion, despair, and grief they come to see the world, and themselves, in a new way.

#### Works Cited

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