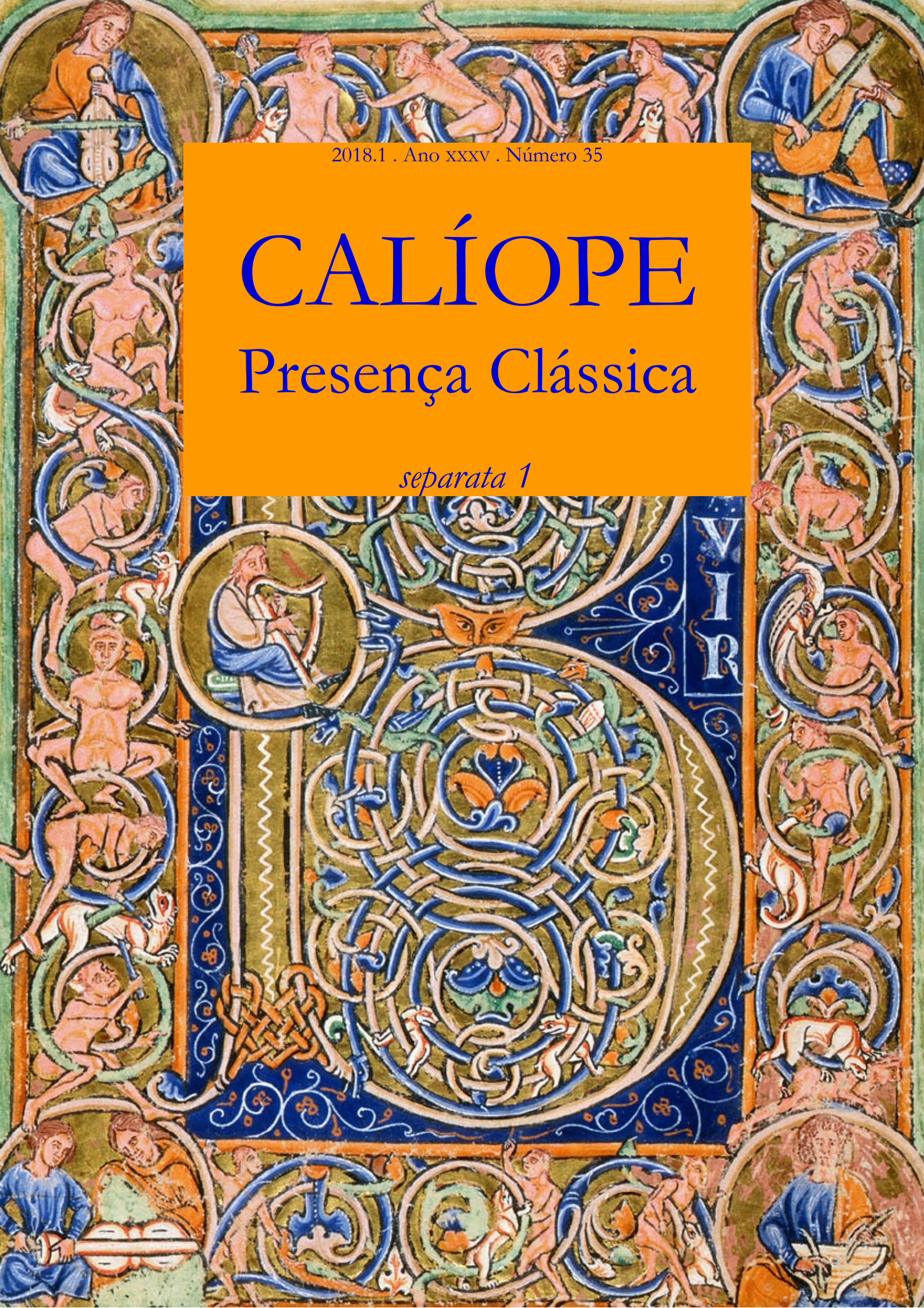


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# A coup de théâtre in the *Odyssey*

## Ioannis Petropoulos

### RESUMO

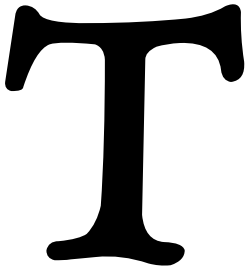
A *Iliada* e a *Odisseia* contam com entradas e saídas dramáticas. Algumas dessas fazem parte do “drama social” de fala, de gesticulações e de movimento em um palácio. O comportamento áulico pode adquirir um peso simbólico enorme: por exemplo, a entrada de Odisseu no palácio do rei Alcínoo (7.83) e a sua teatral auto-humilhação junto à fogueira do palácio (7.153 sqq.). A entrada de Odisseu e a sua autorrevelação espetaculosa no seu palácio no começo de *Odisseia* XXII são altamente dramáticas e são um *coup de théâtre*. O seu pulo para ação leva os pretendentes a reconhecê-lo e significa a merecida desgraça deles. Essa mudança repentina do curso dos eventos, que coincide com a virada (*peripeteia*) representa o que Aristóteles, na sua *Poética*, iria categorizar como o tipo mais requintado de reconhecimento trágico.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Entradas e saídas dramáticas; *μνηστηροφονία* em *Odisseia* XXII; comportamento áulico; *Poética* de Aristóteles; peripécia; *anagnórisis*; *coup de théâtre*.

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he term *coup de théâtre* goes back at least to Diderot's *Entretiens sur le fils naturel* (1757), and means literally a stroke or blow that more or less violently interrupts an expectation or a conscious plan in a play and brings about a reversal or, in Aristotelian language, a *peripeteia*, i.e. 'a change to the opposite direction of events' (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 11.1452a 24-5). In the *Poetics*, the abrupt turn of events in tragedy, which is both unexpected and yet also in some sense necessary or likely, results in the downfall of the protagonist; when well planned by the author, this change coincides with 'recognition' or *anagnorisis*, defined by Aristotle as 'a change from ignorance to knowledge, leading to friendship or enmity, and involving matters which bear on prosperity or adversity' (ibid., 11.1452a 29-33).<sup>1</sup> In this article I intend to read in a 'dramatistic' fashion the culminating events set in train from the end of *Odyssey* 21 and the beginning of book 22, the so-called *μνηστηροφονία*.<sup>2</sup> Of course the poem is a *diegesis*, not drama; but all of us would agree with Aristotle's observation that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are highly dramatic, as evidenced by direct speech.<sup>3</sup> Theatricality is also quite evident in court ceremonial, particularly the stately entrances and exits, in the *Odyssey*, of characters such as Penelope in book 1 (verses 328-36, 360-4) and Helen in book 4 (verses 121-37).<sup>4</sup>

Although it does not follow the script of royal etiquette, Odysseus' entry into the palace of King Alcinoos in book 7 is noteworthy not merely because it is dramatic but because it provides a parallel for the *coup de théâtre* I will be looking at in book 22. As the hero, wrapped in mist, stands on the bronze threshold (7.83-4, 87, cf. 135), he enjoys an extraordinary (indeed physiologically improbable) linear view of the palace's interior and of the outdoor magic orchard.<sup>5</sup> His vista is conveyed as a description of some fifty verses (84-132) during which the action halts. The digression symbolically arrests the hero's movement, and heightens the dramatic impact of his entry.<sup>6</sup> Then in verse 135 (which completes the ring-structure) the narrative proper resumes

when Odysseus, as the narrator says, ‘stepped quickly over the threshold into the palace.’ No less symbolic will be his exit when in book 13 (verse 63) he will again step over the threshold of the palace, although the poet does not here elevate this action through retardation. In the setting of the *Odyssey* 7 and 13 the threshold may be the border between the quasi-fantastic and the mundane. In the context of actual court ceremonial, entrance and exit over the threshold of a palace may signal movement into or from the sublime sphere of a monarch; certain types of behaviour taking place in a royal court may be regarded in a ‘dramatic’ way, again to cite Victor Turner.<sup>7</sup>

In the same scene (which, as said, begins in book 7) Odysseus not only enters in a ‘marked’ manner, he also immediately performs another action, a socio-religious one. Without further ado, ‘about the knees of Arete Odysseus threw his arms’ (7.142 ) whereupon the mist of invisibility evaporates. He utters a prayer of *hiketeia*, addressing the queen, her husband, and the banqueters, and then proceeds to sit down in the ashes of the smouldering hearth (153 ff.), a sacred space. One scholar has called his ritual stance a ‘histrionic display[s] of humility.’<sup>8</sup> This takes place in the palace; not only Odysseus’ self-abasement but also his helpless tone is deeply theatrical. It is little wonder that the supplication-plot was later turned to good account by tragedies such as *The Suppliants* of Aeschylus and of Euripides, Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* and Euripides’ *Children of Herakles*.

Because the King and Queen are taken completely by surprise, as Homer remarks (144-5), they do not react; they leave the stranger sitting in the ashes without indicating through gesture or speech or both whether they assent to his request for protection. The Phaiakian elder Echeneos alerts Alkinoos to his breach of court etiquette. The monarch reacts by the equally theatrical gesture of taking the suppliant by hand, raising him from the hearth and seating next to himself (167 ff.), a placement reserved for VIPs. Actions in theatre and in a royal court can speak louder than words.

Consider now the end of book 21, which lays the scene for the *coup de théâtre* in the next book. The scene is set in the court of Ithaka, which, unlike the court of king Alkinoos, is dysfunctional, anomic, and more mundane, far removed from fairy tale. But it is a court, as indicated by details such as θύρας μεγάρων εὖ ναιεταόντων/ ‘the doors of the stately halls’ (387) and θύρας εὐερκέος ἀλλῆς/ ‘the gates of the well-fenced court’ (389). Odysseus is disguised, it is important to remember, as a wizened old beggar in dirty clothes (13.430 ff.). Despite all probability, he manages to string the bow; as our narrator puts it (21. 404 ff.), he does this just as an *oidos* who ‘easily stretches the string (χορδήν) about a new leather-strap’ (407, νέω πέρι κόλλοπι). The hero plucks the string (νευρή), producing the sweet sound of a swallow’s song (411, ἦ δ’ ὑπὸ καλὸν ἄεισε, χελιδόνη εικέλη αὐδήν). Odysseus the expert *oidos* is now armed not with the repertory of the songs of his marine adventures, but with a bow ready to be loaded with arrows. His musical instrument, which would ordinarily grace a royal feast with its song, has become the equivalent of a machine gun. The dulcet tone of the thrumming string is counterpointed by the sound of Zeus’s thunder. This is a dramatic signal, heralding a highly theatrical turn of events (413, Ζεὺς δὲ μεγάλ’ ἔκτυπε σήματα φαίνων). The suitors are anxious (412-13) as they watch the beggar shoot the arrow through the target. After congratulating himself in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> person (424 ff.), Odysseus paradoxically issues the commands of a host, as if he were the lord of the manor: ‘Let’s have dinner’, he says, ‘and let there be song’ (μολπή, 428-30). So ends book 21.

Then in the very first verse of book 22, verses 1-3, ‘... Odysseus of many wiles stripped off his rags/ and sprang to the great threshold with the bow and the quiver/ full of arrows’. Stripped of his rags—he reassumes his godlike appearance but without being recognisable—and standing on the emblematic threshold (οὐδός), he ironically announces the end of the ominous contest (ἄεθλος). His next two utterances (6-7) continue in this lethally ironic vein. Contrary to all probability, Odysseus enacts the *coup de théâtre*: as Homer puts it, ‘Who among men at a banquet/

could think that one man against many .../ could be so destructive?’ (12-14). He shoots Antinous in the throat, and when the suitors denounce the stranger for what they think is an accidental killing, he indirectly reveals his identity by summing up their collective crimes and sentencing them to death (22.35 ff., ‘You dogs.../...you wasted my house, etc.’). Eurymachus recognises him (44) and there follows an *agon*, such as we find in tragedy and comedy (45-68).

Odysseus’ dramatic entrance and self-revelation usher in the crowning *coup de théâtre* or *peripeteia* of the *Odyssey*. A double-edged change (μεταβολή) has come to pass at a stroke—or *coup*. Carefully orchestrated by the Homeric narrator, it ensues ‘from the preceding events by necessity or probability’ (*Poetics* 10. 1452a 18-20) and startles the suitors (and the audience). ἐγμνώθη, the third word in the first verse of book 22, is the abrupt beginning of the correspondingly abrupt, violent end in the royal court. The suitors rush through the hall (23) in panic, and within moments realise the stranger’s identity (again, 44 ff.). This is, in Aristotelian terms, at once ‘a change from ignorance to knowledge’ (‘recognition’) and ‘a change to the opposite direction of events’ (a reversal or *peripeteia*)—the best kind of recognition according to Aristotle (see again 11.1452a 31-2, ‘The finest recognition is that which occurs simultaneously with reversal.’). The suitors are jolted into the acquisition of ‘knowledge’ accompanied with the emotion of fear as they are hurtled from prosperity to well-deserved death. *Peripeteia* at its most tragic presupposes the recognition of persons such as happens in *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Iphigeneia in Tauris*.<sup>9</sup> The suitors too experience an *anagnorisis*, and it is deadly.



ABSTRACT

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* feature dramatic entrances and exits, some of which are part of the ‘social drama’ of speech, gestures, and movement in a palace. Court behaviour can acquire enormous symbolic weight: for instance, Odysseus’ entrance in King Alcinoos’ palace (7.83) and his histrionic self-abasement in the hearth in the palace (7. 153 ff.). Odysseus’ entrance and startling self-revelation in his palace in the opening of *Odyssey* 22 are highly dramatic, and are a *coup de théâtre*. His leap into action jolts the suitors into recognising him, and spells their deserved doom. Coinciding as it does with reversal (*peripeteia*), this sudden change in the course of events represents what Aristotle in his *Poetics* would categorise as the finest type of tragic recognition.

KEYWORDS

Dramatic entrances & exits; *Odyssey* 22, μνηστροφονία; Court behaviour; Aristotle, *Poetics*; Peripeteia; Anagnorisis; Coup de théâtre.

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<sup>1</sup>Translations of all passages from the *Poetics* are quoted from Halliwell (1999). For *anagnorisis* in this work see MacFarlane (2000), 367-83, esp. 380 whose interpretation essentially supports Halliwell's translation of *Poetics* 11. 1452a 24-5 and 29-33.

<sup>2</sup>I borrow the term 'dramatic' from Turner (1974). Aristotle cites three instances of recognition in the *Odyssey*: *Poetics* 16.1454b 26-30 (Euryclia's and the swineherds' recognition of Odysseus' scar) and at 16.1455a 1-3 (Odysseus 'recognises' the song of Demodocus). For recognition scenes in *Odyssey* and their treatment in ancient literary criticism see Richardson (1983), 219-35.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., *Poetics* 4. 1448b 34-5: '[sc. Homer] was preeminent not only in quality but also in composing dramatic *mimesis*.'

<sup>4</sup>Petropoulos (2011), 57-8 on Penelope's diva-like entrance into the male sphere. For exits and entrances in ancient Greek tragedy cf. Taplin (1978), 31-57.

<sup>5</sup>Dawe (1993), 103: '...even the most lynx-eyed traveller would have difficulty in identifying dogs as the deathless creations of Hephaistos if someone did not volunteer that information to him.' De Jong (2001), 176 ad 7.81-135 remarks that this stereoscopic focalisation is caused by the narrator's omniscient view intruding on Odysseus'.

<sup>6</sup>De Jong op. cit., 176 notes that the retardation of the narrative from 7.83 onwards lends weight—or we might say, theatricality—to Odysseus' action of crossing the threshold.

<sup>7</sup>Turner op. cit., esp. 23 ff. on 'social dramas'.

<sup>8</sup>Dawe op. cit., 288 ad 7.153.

<sup>9</sup>*Poetics* 11. 1452a 38-1452b2: '...joint recognition and reversal will yield either pity or fear' (i.e. in the spectator).