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### Horribly Similar: Reading the Name of Smerdis in Herodotus

The Smerdis who impersonates Cambyses' assassinated brother in book three of Herodotus really is, as an Homeric interpretation of his name suggests, horrible (*smerdnos* or *smerdaleos*); and he's also really (*kai dê kai*) called Smerdis, which contradicts Darius' own version of events in the Behistun inscription. The shared name is formally superfluous - a bizarre redundancy of similarity in a narrative that otherwise conforms to the recognisable pattern of a usurper narrative (see Lang in *JNES* 1992). Why is it important for Herodotus that pseudo-Smerdis can "sail to power" (*epibateuôn*) on his real name?

This "similarity" between two men in both body and name, and the similarity of the name itself to the impostor's mutilated body (compare 1.139 - all Persians' names are "similar to their bodies and their magnificence"), is an indication of the analogical [link](#) that obtains between words and the world in Herodotus; and Cambyses is the reader within the text who is supposed to perceive this link. Further doublings reinforce this idea: two pairs of brothers (pseudo-Smerdis, like the real one, ends up as the brother of the effective ruler - Patizeithes, who does not form part of the Behistun version); two prophetic warnings (Cambyses dreams that he hears a report about someone called Smerdis sitting on his throne; and he has already received an oracle informing him that he will meet his end in a city called Ecbatana - he fails to avoid these pitfalls because he doesn't realise there are two Ecbatanas, just as there are two Smerdises). These instances of doubling, of failure to perceive the double reference of critical words, combine to teach us (along with Cambyses) what Croesus has already learned to his cost: making life and death judgments involves "taking together" (*sullambanein*) the two sides of any significant information (dreams, oracles, *historiê*). Doing this successfully means grasping (almost literally) the deceptively transparent link of "similarity" between words and things (the world of information and the physical world), and the analogous link between the different components of discourse (in particular beginnings and endings - the extremities and superlatives of language).