

A MAD KING IN A MAD WORLD: THE DEATH OF CAMBYSES IN HERODOTUS*

Abstract: This paper advances a theological interpretation of the madness, downfall, and death of the Herodotean Cambyses, understood as divine retribution for the king’s slaying of Apis, the supreme violation of Egyptian *nomoi*. The first section defines the scope of Cambyses’ punishment more expansively than previous scholarship, from Smerdis’ murder to Cambyses’ anguished final days of restored sanity. The second section analyses Cambyses’ unusual variety of madness as a sort of ‘hyper-rationality’ that, ironically, blinds the mad king to the ‘madness’ of the world. The king’s ruin ultimately proves the moral of the Cambyses *logos*, that it is madness to deride *nomoi*, no matter how laughable they might appear.

Keywords: Herodotus, Cambyses, Apis, madness, divine retribution, *nomoi*, tragedy

Introduction

In this paper I analyse the death of the Persian king Cambyses in Book 3 of Herodotus’ *Histories* in theological terms as divine retribution for his slaying of the sacred Apis bull in Memphis (Hdt. 3.29). This dimension of the Cambyses *logos* has been widely recognised, but the aim of this paper is twofold: to delineate more precisely the scope of the divine vengeance against Cambyses and to reflect on the implications of this story in greater depth than previous commentators have done. I read Herodotus’ Cambyses narrative as a morality tale comparable, for instance, to his treatment of the Trojan War, whose moral the historian asserts with remarkable conviction: ‘I am convinced and declare—the divine powers provided that the Trojans, perishing in utter destruction, should make this clear to all mankind: that retribution from the gods for terrible wrongdoing is also terrible. This is what I think, and I state it.’¹ It is the contention of this paper that a similar moral could be appended to the story of Cambyses’ destruction as well.² To be sure, generalising about a work as diverse as the *Histories* is a risky venture, and I do not mean to imply

* I would like to thank the journal’s anonymous readers as well as Al Duncan and Emily Baragwanath for their many helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Any remaining errors are mine alone. Unless otherwise specified, all citations come from Herodotus’ *Histories*. The text of Herodotus is that of Wilson’s OCT; the translation is Godley’s in the Loeb.

¹ Hdt. 2.120.5: ὡς μὲν ἐγὼ γνώμην ἀποφαίνομαι, τοῦ δαιμονίου παρασκευάζοντος ὅκως πανωλεθρίῃ ἀπολόμενοι καταφανές τοῦτο τοῖσι ἀνθρώποισι ποιήσωσι, ὡς τῶν μεγάλων ἀδικημάτων μεγάλαι εἰσὶ καὶ αἱ τιμωρίαι παρὰ τῶν θεῶν. καὶ ταῦτα μὲν τῇ ἐμοὶ δοκέει εἴρηται.

² For moralising in Herodotus, see Fisher (2002), Hau (2016) ch. 4.

that every Herodotean narrative is a morality tale or is grounded in a systematic moral philosophy.³ Nevertheless, some episodes in the work, like the Trojan War story, are explicitly moralising, and I argue that the Cambyses *logos* invites such a reading as well.

I will proceed in two major sections. First, I define the extent of Cambyses' punishment, working backwards from the elements of the king's downfall that are most to least clearly recognisable as part of the elaborate vengeance plot orchestrated by the gods.⁴ Important elements of this plot include Cambyses' accidental self-stabbing, his madness, his murder of his brother Smerdis, the coup of the Magi, and, in a nice twist, his recovery of sanity before dying. The full scope, intricacy, and almost surgical precision of the gods' punishment thus emerges as a testament to their awe-inspiring power and suggests a theology comparable to that of much Attic tragedy.

Second, I identify a certain irony in the circumstances of Cambyses' downfall that serves to underline the avowed moral of the Cambyses *logos*, that it is madness to offend against *nomoi* (3.38). Ironically, by this standard the gods punish Cambyses for a crime that is at once 'mad' and aggressively rationalistic, testing the divinity of an animal that Egyptian *nomos* regards as a god. This seeming paradox owes to Cambyses' unique brand of 'hyper-rational' madness, which blinds him to the irrational aspects of the world. Likewise, Cambyses' ruin is predicated on the confusion generated by an implausible doubling of Smerdises, paralleled by the narrative's doubling of Ecbatanas; this doubling functions as a symptom of a sort of madness inherent in the world, which does not always operate according to the dictates of rationality and probability. The great irony of the Cambyses *logos* is that the mad king is undone precisely by his failure to take into account the madness of a world that hallucinates twin Smerdises and bull calves that are really gods. Cambyses' fatal reproof by the gods constitutes an object lesson in the dangers of overconfidence in the powers of human reason, especially in the face of *nomoi*.

I. The Extent of Cambyses' Punishment

The Thigh Wound

Cambyses dies seemingly by accident in the midst of a burgeoning political crisis. While stationed with his army in Syria, the king learns that his brother

³ Cf. Harrison (2000) 240–2.

⁴ I will refer to Cambyses' punishment as coming from 'the gods', because Herodotus never specifies which god(s) enact(s) it. Some scholars have assumed, quite reasonably, that Apis himself is the avenging deity in question (e.g., Harrison (2000) 214–15), but I will maintain the Herodotean ambiguity.

Smerdis has usurped the throne of the Persian empire in his absence (3.62.1). This news is quite puzzling, as Cambyses had earlier arranged for his brother to be killed in secret. He had been prompted by a dream in which ‘a message had come to him that Smerdis sitting on the royal throne touched heaven with his head’ (ἐδόκεε ἐν τῷ ὕπνῳ ἀπαγγεῖλαι τινά οἱ ὡς Σμέρδης ἰζόμενος ἐς τὸν βασιλῆιον θρόνον ψαύσειε τῇ κεφαλῇ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, 3.64.1). But soon Cambyses deduces that, in fact, his brother really is dead, and a Magus also named Smerdis has assumed his identity and usurped the throne (3.62–3). The king’s first reaction to this revelation is to weep for his brother, whom, he realises, he had murdered for nothing (μάτην ἀπολωλεκῶς εἶη τὸν ἀδελφεόν, 3.64.2). Then (3.64.2–3):

ἀποκλαύσας δὲ καὶ περιημεκτήσας τῇ ἀπάσῃ συμφορῇ ἀναθρόσκει ἐπὶ τὸν ἵππον, ἐν νόῳ ἔχων τὴν ταχίστην ἐς Σοῦσα στρατεύεσθαι ἐπὶ τὸν μάγον. καὶ οἱ ἀναθρόσκοντι ἐπὶ τὸν ἵππον τοῦ κολεοῦ τοῦ ξίφους ὁ μύκης ἀποπίπτει, γυμνωθὲν δὲ τὸ ξίφος παίει τὸν μηρόν· τρωματισθεὶς δὲ κατὰ τωυτό τῇ αὐτὸς πρότερον τὸν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων θεὸν Ἄπιν ἔπληξε ...

Having wept, and grieved by all his misfortune, he sprang upon his horse, with intent to march at once to Susa against the Magus. As he sprang upon his horse, the cap fell off the sheath of his sword, and the naked blade pierced his thigh, wounding him in the same place where he had once wounded the Egyptian god Apis ...

The wound appears mortal (καιρίῃ ἔδοξε, 3.64.3), but Cambyses’ death is not instantaneous. Rather, he first asks the name of the city in which he and the army are currently stationed. On receiving the answer Ecbatana in Syria, Cambyses realises that he is fulfilling an oracle from Buto that he would die in Ecbatana. Once again, this revelation comes as a surprise: Cambyses had always assumed that the oracle referred to Median Ecbatana, where he planned to pass away in old age (3.64.3–4). Now that he understands the oracle correctly, Cambyses resigns himself to die (3.64.5). Herodotus reports the king’s death thus (3.66.2):

μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ὡς ἐσφακέλισέ τε τὸ ὀστέον καὶ ὁ μηρὸς τάχιστα ἐσάπη, ἀπήνεικε Καμβύσεια τὸν Κύρου, βασιλεύσαντα μὲν τὰ πάντα ἑπτὰ ἔτεα καὶ πέντε μῆνας, ἄπαιδα δὲ τὸ παράπαν ἔοντα ἔρσηνος καὶ θήλεος γόνου.

But when after this the bone rotted and the thigh rapidly putrefied, it carried off Cambyses son of Cyrus, who had reigned in all seven years and five months, but was altogether childless, without male or female issue.

Nowhere in this account does the narrator explicitly signal anything supernatural about Cambyses' death. Nevertheless, many scholars have rightly seen a supernatural significance in the fact that Cambyses receives his mortal stab-wound in the same place that he had earlier stabbed the Apis bull, whom the Egyptians consider to be a god incarnate (3.27–8).⁵ Cambyses had ordered the new Apis calf brought to him, apparently to test its divinity,⁶ whereupon he 'drew his dagger and, meaning to stab the calf in the belly, struck the thigh' (*σπασάμενος τὸ ἐγχειρίδιον, θέλων τύψαι τὴν γαστέρα τοῦ Ἄπιος παίει τὸν μηρόν*, 3.29.1).⁷ In addition to wounds in homologous places, their deaths are similarly drawn-out: like Cambyses, whose wound putrefies for at least three weeks before his death (3.65.1), Apis does not die immediately but is first taken to the temple, where he lies down and fades away (*ἔφθινε* [note the imperfect] *ἐν τῷ ἱρῷ κατακείμενος*, 3.29.3). What at first appears strictly accidental can in fact be understood as divine retribution: the same mortal wound that the king had inflicted on Apis is now visited upon his own body.

John Gould has well observed of divine intervention in Herodotus, '[W]hat we call "coincidence", above all if it concerns something of serious significance, is in itself one of those "uncanny" occurrences that, in a religious system such as I have defined [sc. Greek religion to be], will point unerringly to the action of a supernatural power'.⁸ Cambyses' wound, which corresponds so uncannily to the wound that he dealt the Apis bull, is one of the examples that Gould cites to illustrate this principle.⁹ Indeed, Gould's observation can be used to explicate another detail in Herodotus' narrative that, to my knowledge, has heretofore gone unremarked upon. When Cambyses stabs Apis, Herodotus is careful to mention that he had been aiming for the bull's

⁵ E.g., Reinhardt (1940) 163–4; Gammie (1986) 180; Erbse (1992) 54–5; Harrison (2000) 85–6; de Jong (2006) 12; Hau (2016) 185, 188–9. Indeed, the narrator raises the possibility of divine intervention by inserting the designation 'the Egyptian god' in apposition to Apis' name (*τὸν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων θεὸν Ἄπιν*, 3.64.3) in the description of Cambyses' accident.

⁶ 'He said that if a tame god had come to the Egyptians he would know it' (*οὐ λήσειν ἔφη αὐτὸν εἰ θεὸς τις χειροθήης ἀπιγμένος εἴη Αἰγυπτίοισι*, 3.28.1). When the god is wounded, Cambyses taunts the Egyptians as fools for believing in such gods. Georges (1994) 190 speaks of Cambyses assaulting Apis in order '[t]o test its godhead with the sword'. For the test as a perversion of ethnological experiment, see Munson (1991) 59; Provencal (2015) 233.

⁷ The phrase *παίει τὸν μηρόν* is repeated verbatim in Cambyses' self-stabbing episode (3.64.3).

⁸ Gould (2003) 301. Cf. the formulation of a similar principle by Munson (2001) 50–1: 'Coincidences among mutually autonomous occurrences point to a unitarian historical movement and mysterious interconnection'. She lists the coincidence of Apis' and Cambyses' thigh wounds as an example of this phenomenon ((2001) 51 n. 25).

⁹ As also in Gould (1989) 75.

stomach,¹⁰ but without explanation, he goes on to say that the king stabbed its thigh, instead (3.29.1). Does Cambyses miss his mark here, even at point-blank range? Apparently so, even though in another story in the *Histories*, Cambyses tenders his exceptional aim (displayed by shooting an arrow through his cupbearer's heart) as dubious proof of his sanity and sobriety (3.35.2–4).¹¹

The purpose of this stray, discrepant detail is mysterious within its immediate context, but it emerges clearly if Cambyses' near-miss is read in conjunction with his later self-stabbing and in light of Gould's principle. After all, if Cambyses had successfully stabbed Apis' stomach, the parallel between his own thigh wound and the injury that he deals the bull god would evaporate; and without that parallel, the most important grounds for understanding Cambyses' self-stabbing as divine retribution would disappear, too.¹² In order for Cambyses' death to be recognised as a punishment for his crime against Apis, a coincidence of the type delineated by Gould had to be engineered. Therefore, behind Cambyses' inexplicably poor aim we may imagine the hand of the gods, redirecting his blow from stomach to thigh in order to manufacture this tell-tale parallel.¹³

On this reading, even in Cambyses' moment of supreme sacrilege and tyrannical hubris, the king is not really in control. Already, unseen divine forces are subtly directing his hand, preparing for the revelation of their role in his punishment even before he has landed his criminal blow against the god. Without ever suggesting it outright, Herodotus enables a reading of Cambyses' self-wounding as divine vengeance for his transgression against Apis, and it is even possible to see the gods (as well as the narrator) taking steps to ensure the viability of this reading.

¹⁰ Presumably because the belly is a large, soft target and a vital point, though Cambyses' motive is not given.

¹¹ There is a notable theomachic tinge to this shooting episode as well, when Prexaspes flatters the king, 'Master, I think that not even the god himself could shoot so true' (Δέσποτα, οὐδ' ἂν αὐτὸν ἔγωγε δοκέω τὸν θεὸν οὕτω ἂν καλῶς βαλεῖν, 3.35.4). Prexaspes' praise is reminiscent of such myths as Eurystus' ill-starred challenge of Apollo to an archery contest (*Od.* 8.226–8). Asheri (2007) ad loc. comments of the god in question: 'a nameless god, whom a Greek could call "Apollo the Archer" and a Persian "Mithras"'.

¹² It might be argued that had Cambyses stabbed Apis in the stomach, the gods could have contrived for him to stab himself in the gut as well, thus enabling the parallel to stand. But given the way that the *acinaces* was worn, a seemingly accidental injury of the thigh would have been far more likely to occur; see Walser (1983) 15–18.

¹³ Cambyses' poor aim further enriches the parallel because, if he had stabbed the bull's stomach, it would have presumably died immediately. The thigh wounds assure that both the king and the god suffer long, drawn-out deaths. Cf. Pafford (2011) 26, who notes that Cambyses' failure to strike the bull's 'vital organs' causes it prolonged suffering.

The Madness

The possibility of another divine punishment for stabbing Apis is explicitly raised in Herodotus' narrative. According to the Egyptians, Cambyses went mad immediately after and because of this crime (*αὐτίκα διὰ τοῦτο τὸ ἀδίκημα ἐμάνη*, 3.30.1)—that is, through the agency of the gods. It is questionable, however, to what extent the narrative endorses the Egyptians' assessment. Elsewhere, Herodotus leaves open the question of whether Cambyses' mad crimes were committed because of Apis or another reason (*εἴτε δὴ διὰ τὸν Ἄπιν εἴτε καὶ ἄλλως*, 3.33). What is more, he immediately qualifies the Egyptian tradition by noting that 'even before [sc. the Apis incident] he had not been sensible' (*ἔων οὐδὲ πρότερον φρενήρης*, 3.30.1)—unless this concessive participial phrase is construed as part of what 'the Egyptians say' (*ὡς λέγουσι Αἰγύπτιοι*).¹⁴ Indeed, Herodotus explains Cambyses' decision to stab Apis in the first place by calling him 'all but mad' (*ὑπομαργότερος*, 3.29.1); and certainly if it is the case that, as Herodotus argues, only someone 'quite insane' (*ἐμάνη μεγάλως*) would 'set himself to deride religion and custom' (*ἱροῦσί τε καὶ νομαίοισι ἐπεχείρησε καταγελᾶν*, 3.38.1), then Cambyses was already well past the brink of madness when he laughed about stabbing the Apis bull (*γελάσας*, 3.29.1).¹⁵

Earlier still, Herodotus had declared Cambyses 'not in his right mind but mad' (*ἐμμανής τε ἔων καὶ οὐ φρενήρης*, 3.25.2) when in his anger the king had recklessly rushed into his inadvisable campaign against the Ethiopians.¹⁶ In fact, Cambyses may have been mad even from birth. This would certainly be the case if his madness is related to his hereditary epilepsy, as Herodotus

¹⁴ Thus, e.g., Thumiger (2017) 270 appears to understand the Greek. If so, the Egyptians themselves would postulate a deterioration in Cambyses' sanity following the Apis stabbing, and many of the problems outlined below would disappear.

¹⁵ Cf. earlier his mocking appellation of 'a tame god' for Apis (*θεός τις χειροθήης*, 3.28.1). Lateiner (1977) 177–8 connects Cambyses' frequent and inappropriate laughter to his madness, observing, 'No one in Herodotus laughs more (six times), or with less reason' (177). In an earlier episode, Cambyses is not described as mocking, but he certainly does flout both Egyptian and Persian customs when he abuses Amasis' corpse, as Herodotus is at pains to emphasise (3.16.1–4).

¹⁶ Cambyses' madness is revealed by his failure to take thought for provisions or to consider how long an expedition to the end of the earth will be. Likewise, Cambyses shows himself not to be a wise man (*ἀνὴρ σοφός*, 3.25.5) a little later when he fails to change his mind and abort the campaign once the army has run out of supplies and eaten their pack-animals. Only when a portion of the army resorts to cannibalism does Cambyses elect to turn around.

once suggests (3.33).¹⁷ Likewise, the historian may not find it credible (ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐ πιθανός, 3.3.1), but the story of the excessive vengeance against Egypt promised by a young Cambyses—to ‘avenge’ Cyrus’ preference of an Egyptian wife to his own mother—would lend credence to the idea of lifelong mental imbalance, at least.¹⁸

Moreover, the *Histories* is open to considering several other causes for Cambyses’ madness.¹⁹ Besides Herodotus’ medical explanation (3.33), Croesus blames the king’s ‘youth and temper’ (ἡλικίη καὶ θυμῶ, 3.36.1); Otanes argues that a monarch’s power to ‘do what he wants with impunity’ (ἔξεστι ἀνευθύνῳ ποιέειν τὰ βούλεται) ‘would stir even the best man on earth to unaccustomed thoughts’ (καὶ γὰρ ἂν τὸν ἄριστον ἀνδρῶν πάντων ... ἐκτὸς τῶν ἐωθότων νοημάτων στήσειε, 3.80.3);²⁰ and in the story of the death of Prexaspes’ son, even the possibility that drunkenness is the cause of Cambyses’ ‘madness and frenzy’ (οἴνῳ προσκείμενον παραφρονέειν καὶ οὐκ εἶναι νοήμονα, 3.34.3) is briefly broached.²¹ It may appear, then, that just as Herodotus rejects a couple of other Egyptian accounts in the Cambyses *logos*,²² he implies that the Egyptians are wrong on the score of Cambyses’ madness, too.

Faced with such a flurry of causative factors and indeterminacies, readers are certainly entitled to infer that Herodotus mentions the Egyptian

¹⁷ On the knowledge of Hippocratic medicine that Herodotus displays here, see Thomas (2000) 34–5; Pafford (2011).

¹⁸ Cf. Brown (1982) 400 n. 41.

¹⁹ In an excellent article on the Herodotean Cambyses’ madness, Munson (1991) identifies three cultural codes according to which his condition can be understood: theological, sociocultural, and medical.

²⁰ For Cambyses’ power to do whatever he wants, cf. his nickname ‘master’ (δεσπότης, 3.89.3) but especially 3.31.4, where Cambyses’ royal judges invoke the law that the king could ‘do whatever he liked’ (ποιέειν τὸ ἂν βούλεται), in order to permit Cambyses’ marriage to his own sister.

²¹ This last episode reveals Cambyses’ awareness of his own madness, or at least of his reputation for it. Whereas Prexaspes only reports that the Persians say that the king ‘loves wine too well’ (φιλοινίη ... πλεόνως προσκεῖσθαι, 3.34.2), Cambyses immediately detects an imputation of madness: ‘If the Persians now say that it is my fondness for wine that drives me to frenzy and madness ...’ (νῦν ἄρα μέ φασι Πέρσαι οἴνῳ προσκείμενον παραφρονέειν καὶ οὐκ εἶναι νοήμονα, 3.34.3; cf. 3.35.1–2, 4) (Thumiger (2017) 224 n. 113). Notably, in covering the parallel career of Cleomenes, Herodotus considers the explanation that that king’s madness arose from heavy drinking (6.84.1), but he prefers the explanation of divine punishment (6.84.3). Cf. de Jong (2006) 12.

²² Herodotus emphatically rejects Egyptian variants in the Cambyses *logos* at 3.2 and 3.16.5–7.

explanation of Cambyses' madness only to imply its inadequacy.²³ But equally, Herodotus' narrative opens the way for other avenues of interpretation as well. Readers of the *Histories* will know that Herodotus is frequently open to the possibility of multiple, co-existing explanations.²⁴ For example, Xerxes' decision to invade Greece (7.1–19) has been called the 'most elaborately deployed, important, and over-determined decision in the *Histories*'.²⁵ In such cases, it is left to Herodotus' readers to parse the data presented by his narrative, either by selecting what they view as the real cause(s) or by harmonising the various options as they may. In the case of Cambyses, several scholars have integrated the diverse data by positing that while the king has always been mentally unstable, divine vengeance for the slaughter of Apis causes a notable deterioration in his condition.²⁶ On such a reading, Herodotus does not reject but qualifies the Egyptian explanation by noting other contributing factors and contextualising Cambyses' madness within a history of mental instability.

There is, in fact, positive evidence in the structure of Herodotus' narrative to support such an inference. Herodotus may not endorse the Egyptian explanation outright, but he evidently conceives of the Apis episode as an important turning point in the *logos*. Immediately after citing the Egyptian explanation of the king's madness (3.30.1), he begins a new section of the narrative that consists of an enumeration of Cambyses' 'evil acts' (*καὶ πρῶτα μὲν τῶν κακῶν ἐξεργάσατο*, 3.30.1; cf. 3.31.1). Metanarrative statements break these evil deeds down into three subsections, organised by victim:²⁷

- 3.30–3: 'Such were Cambyses' mad acts to his own household' (*ταῦτα μὲν ἐς τοὺς οἰκηοιτάτους ὁ Καμβύσης ἐξεμάνη*, 3.33);

²³ Lateiner (1989) 196–210 notes the variety of types of explanation in Herodotus, such that different readers with different worldviews may seize upon pious, religious explanations or secular alternatives where both options are offered (e.g., in explaining Xerxes' decision to invade Greece; *ibid.* 204–5). Conversely, both causes may also co-exist as 'different levels of explanation' (205), 'supplementary rather than contradictory' (208).

²⁴ See, e.g., Lateiner (1989) 205–10; Gould (1989) ch. 4; Pelling (1991) 139–42; Harrison (2003) 248–51; Fowler (2010) 332–3.

²⁵ Fisher (2002) 220. For an analysis of the various factors at play in motivating Xerxes' decision, see Baragwanath (2008) 242–53.

²⁶ For Cambyses' worsening condition, cf., e.g., Waters (1971) 54–5; Munson (1991) 50; Erbse (1992) 51–2; Baragwanath (2008) 113–15; Wesselmann (2011) ch. 3; see also above, n. 14.

²⁷ For Herodotus' metanarrative statements and the structure of 3.30–38, see further Munson (1991) 45–8. For a chronological list and summary of Cambyses' various crimes beginning with his desecration of Amasis' corpse, see Hofmann and Vorbichler (1980) 89–91.

- 3.34–6: ‘I will now relate his mad dealings with the rest of Persia’ (τάδε δ’ ἐς τοὺς ἄλλους Πέρσας ἐξεμάνη, 3.34.1; cf. 3.37.1); and
- 3.37 (Cambyses’ offenses against religious custom while in Memphis): ‘I hold it then in every way proved that Cambyses was quite insane; or he would never have set himself to deride religion and custom’ (πανταχῆ ὦν μοι δῆλὰ ἐστι ὅτι ἐμάνη μεγάλως ὁ Καμβύσης· οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἰροῖσιν τε καὶ νομαίοισι ἐπεχείρησε καταγελάειν, 3.38.1).
 - Herodotus then develops this point in his famous νόμος βασιλεύς episode (3.38).

Then, after a pair of lengthy digressions on Samos and Corinth (3.39–60), Herodotus resumes the Cambyses *logos*, first summing up the previous segment of the narrative with a long participial phrase:

- 3.30–7: ‘Now after Cambyses, son of Cyrus, had lost his mind, while he was still in Egypt ...’ (Καμβύση δὲ τῷ Κύρου χρονίζοντι περὶ Αἴγυπτον καὶ παραφρονήσαντι, 3.61.1).

Manifestly, the structure of Herodotus’ narrative presupposes that the mad actions of 3.30–7 form a discrete collection, separable from earlier mad actions like the Ethiopian campaign. As a result, even if Herodotus ostensibly leaves the exact cause(s) of Cambyses’ madness in doubt,²⁸ the structure of his narrative assumes that Apis’ stabbing was the decisive turning point for at least a distinctive phase in his madness—very likely a serious deterioration of his condition.²⁹

The Anguish

Beyond Cambyses’ physical wound and madness, in the chapters devoted to Cambyses’ death, Herodotus devotes much more attention to the king’s emotional pain. Cambyses realises that he has slain his own brother in vain (3.64.2, 65.4), he recognises his own folly (3.65.3–4), and he sees that it is his own fault that he will lack a brother to avenge him against the usurpers (3.65.5–6). Perhaps Cambyses understands as well that had he not killed Smerdis and kept his death a secret, the Magus could never have usurped his brother’s identity and staged his coup in the first place. Thus, on realising that he is

²⁸ Grethlein (2009) 203–4.

²⁹ See above, n. 26. It is also telling that Cambyses’ wits return to him precisely when he has stabbed himself (3.64.3–5)—that is, his madness ends once he has endured another divine punishment for the very crime that the Egyptians consider the source of his madness.

doomed to die, Cambyses summons an audience of Persian chiefs and begins his address to them by emphasising his need to reveal his crime (3.65.1).³⁰ Cambyses' final words also register awareness that, as the narrator emphasises in his death notice (3.66.2), he is dying childless—one of several conditions fulfilled by Cambyses that characterise a Solonian unhappy end.³¹ It is for this reason that Cambyses especially hopes that of all the Persians, his kin, the Achaemenids, will reclaim the throne (3.65.6), since he has no closer family to succeed him.³² After the king makes his last speech, Herodotus reports, 'With that Cambyses wept bitterly for all that had happened to him' (*ἀμα τε εἴπας ταῦτα ὁ Καμβύσης ἀπέκλαιε πᾶσαν τὴν ἑωυτοῦ πρῆξιν*, 3.65.7). The Persians join him in this lamentation (3.66.1), and then Herodotus reports Cambyses' death (3.66.2). Cambyses' end transpires in an atmosphere of unadulterated misery.

This anguish can be considered a significant element of the gods' vengeance in its own right, as the timing of Cambyses' self-stabbing coincides with the revelation of the coup and of the senselessness of his fratricide. Moreover, it is telling that all of the circumstances that cause the king grief in 3.64–6 can be traced in one way or another back to his murder of Smerdis—a crime which, I will argue below, can be understood as another consequence of divine intervention. First of all, the murder carries with it the sheer horror of killing one's own brother—and a full brother at that (3.30.1).³³ In his final speech Cambyses refers to this deed as a 'great wrong' (*κακοῦ τοσοῦτου*, 3.65.3) and bemoans the fate of his brother, 'dead of an unholy destiny at the hands

³⁰ 'Persians, I have to make known to you something which I kept most strictly concealed' (*ὦ Πέρσαι, καταλελάβηκέ με, τὸ πάντων μάλιστα ἔκρυπτον πρηγμάτων, τοῦτο ἐς ὑμέας ἐκφήναι*, 3.65.1). Cf. 3.65.5: 'I would have you believe that Smerdis Cyrus' son no longer lives' (*Σμέρδιν τὸν Κύρου μηκέτι ὑμῖν ἔοντα λογίζεσθε*).

³¹ Cf. 1.32.6, Baragwanath (2015) 29–30. Georges (1994) 187, 191 notes that Cambyses also fails virtually every measure of manhood attributed by Herodotus to Persian culture, including the siring of many sons (1.136.1). Intriguingly, Herodotus' account reflects the common symbolic connection between thigh wounds and impotence (Felton (2014) 53 with n. 34), and conventionally the Apis bull was a symbol of fertility associated with the virility of the Pharaoh (Wilkinson (2003) 170–1; Hart (2005) 30). By stabbing Apis in the thigh, Cambyses may be seen symbolically stabbing himself in the thigh as well, i.e., rendering himself, as the current Pharaoh, impotent. This symbolism, perhaps latent in Herodotus' Egyptian source(s), becomes actualised in the narrative of Cambyses' divine punishment—dying, childless, of a thigh wound.

³² Likewise, Cambyses' concluding wish for fertility and freedom for the Persians if they follow his injunction but the opposite if they do not (3.65.7) seems especially pointed coming from a man dying childless and losing the throne. Cf. his stipulation in the curse that every Persian should die a death like his (*ibid.*).

³³ Cf. de Jong (2006) 14.

of his closest relations' (*οὗτος μὲν ἀνοσίῳ μόρῳ τετελεύτηκε ὑπὸ τῶν ἐωυτοῦ οἰκηιοτάτων*, 3.65.5).³⁴ Beyond the stain of bloodguilt, there are the more practical considerations outlined above. As the Magi perceive (3.61.1–2), by murdering Smerdis but keeping his death a secret, Cambyses created the very conditions that enable the coup in the first place (3.61.1).³⁵ Moreover, as the king himself recognises (3.65.5–6), with no other males in Cyrus' line remaining after his death, Cambyses also eliminated the man who would have avenged him against the Magi.

Ironically, another of Cambyses' major grievances derives from his violent reaction when his sister-wife had articulated just some version of this last point to him. In one version of the story of her death, Cambyses kills her when she laments, with remarkable prescience, that with Smerdis dead, Cambyses will have no one to avenge him (*μνησθεῖσά τε Σμέρδιος καὶ μαθοῦσα ὡς ἐκείνῳ οὐκ εἶη ὁ τιμωρήσων*, 3.32.2). In the other, Egyptian version of the tale, Cambyses kills his wife, who is pregnant with his child in this variant, when she accuses him of having 'stripped Cyrus' house as bare' (*τὸν Κύρου οἶκον ἀποφιλώσας*, 3.32.4) as a defoliated head of lettuce.³⁶ In both stories, tension arises between Cambyses and his wife because of the murder of their mutual brother, and this tension boils over into the wife's murder as well. And in either case, Cambyses' uxoricide further contributes to his childlessness—a point made especially clear in the second version, in which Cambyses' wife is pregnant at the time of her death.

The Dream

Given its grim consequences for Cambyses' emotional wellbeing during his final days, it is worth considering what causes Cambyses to murder his brother Smerdis. If the cause is divine, then the emotional desolation that follows from the murder can be considered a part of the gods' punishment as well. Broadly speaking, the cause of the murder is Cambyses' madness, which, as I have argued, can well be considered an element in the gods' vengeance. In fact, Herodotus lists the deed as Cambyses' first mad act (3.30.1) after slaying Apis (3.29), immediately after citing the Egyptian tradition that connects his madness to this transgression (3.30.1).

The proximate cause of the murder, however, is the misleading dream in which Cambyses hears of 'Smerdis' sitting upon his throne, his head touching

³⁴ I have added the word 'closest' to Godley's translation; the superlative is pointed in the Greek, emphasising the dreadfulness of murder by closest family.

³⁵ de Jong (2006) 7 comments insightfully on the narrative function of the silence surrounding Smerdis' murder.

³⁶ Griffith (2009) explains the symbolic value of the lettuce in this Egyptian variant.

heaven (ἐν τῷ θρόνῳ τῷ βασιληίῳ ἰζόμενος Σμέρδης τῇ κεφαλῇ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ψεύσειε, 3.30.2). It is only natural that Cambyses would mistake the Smerdis in question for his brother rather than the Magus. The mistake comes especially easily given Cambyses' jealousy at his brother's solitary ability to draw the Ethiopian king's bow, a symbol of kingship, back two fingerbreadths (3.30.1).³⁷ Indeed, the timing of this dream seems specially designed to trick the mad king into suspecting his brother of regal ambitions and hence committing fratricide. At any rate, this is certainly the effect of the dream, which is prominently cited twice to explain the murder in the account of Cambyses' death—once by the narrator (3.64.1) and once by Cambyses himself in direct speech (3.65.2).³⁸

And as with Cambyses' madness, the origin of the dream appears to be divine. Cambyses, for one, explicitly attributes the dream to a 'divinity' (ὁ δαίμων, 3.65.4), and there is no reason to doubt his assessment in a work so full of heaven-sent oracular dreams.³⁹ The only question is which god sent the dream, and why. But given the dream's disastrous consequences for Cambyses and the fact that, like the madness, it comes right on the heels of his killing of Apis, it is safe to assume that the same power avenging Apis' death via the madness and thigh wound is also responsible for the misleading dream.⁴⁰ Or put differently, the misleading dream and all its consequences can be considered another plank in the gods' increasingly elaborate plot to avenge Apis' murder. The dream combined with the madness begets the murder, and the murder leads to the various circumstances that Cambyses laments in his final days, adding woe to his physical suffering.⁴¹

The Coup

Perhaps the foregoing argument seems too speculative—is there any evidence that the gods actually intended for Cambyses to murder his own brother? In fact, there is, insofar as there is evidence that the gods intended for the two Smerdises to be confused. Once again, Herodotus is not explicit on this point,

³⁷ de Jong (2006) 5; Baragwanath (2008) 118. For the bow as a symbol of kingship—whence Cambyses' paranoid jealousy—see Balcer (1987) 80–2.

³⁸ On the integral role played by the dream in Cambyses' death, cf. de Jong (2006) 4.

³⁹ See de Jong (2006) 12 with n. 22.

⁴⁰ Cf. Mikalson (2003) 227 n. 78: 'It is noteworthy that the dream sent to Cambyses and those to Xerxes turned out to be erroneous or misleading and destructive. They might well, in retrospect, later have been put down by the Persians to the hostility of the divine'. Erbse (1992) 55 assumes that the dream is part of Cambyses' punishment; see also the discussion of de Jong (2006) 13–15.

⁴¹ Cf. Köhnken (1980) 49, whose expansive view of the gods' vengeance against Cambyses comes closest to my own.

but Gould's observations about the divine and the uncanny provide a way forward. In addition to the coincidence of the two thigh wounds, Gould cites as an example of uncanny coincidences in the Cambyses *logos* the fact that 'the usurping Magus was, like Cambyses' own brother, called Smerdis'.⁴² But in fact, the resemblance between the two is even more uncanny, as Herodotus' introduction of the Magi Patizeithes and Smerdis makes clear (3.61.2):

πρὸς ταῦτα βουλευσας τάδε ἐπεχείρησε τοῖσι βασιλῆίοισι· ἦν οἱ ἀδελφεός, τὸν εἶπά οἱ συνεπαναστῆναι, οἰκῶς μάλιστα τὸ εἶδος Σμέρδι τῷ Κύρου, τὸν ὁ Καμβύσης, ἔοντα ἑωυτοῦ ἀδελφεόν, ἀπέκτεινε. ἦν τε δὴ ὁμοῖος εἶδος τῷ Σμέρδι καὶ δὴ καὶ οὖνομα τῶντὸ εἶχε Σμέρδιν.

Therefore [Patizeithes] plotted to gain the royal power: he had a brother, his partner, as I said, in rebellion; this brother was in appearance very like Cyrus' son Smerdis, whom Cambyses, his brother, had killed; nor was he like him in appearance only, but he bore the same name too, Smerdis.

The detail of the shared name has a definite role in the plot of the Cambyses *logos*, since it is this common name that throws off Cambyses' interpretation of the dream about 'Smerdis' usurping his throne.⁴³ As such, the doubling of the name Smerdis may be compared to the confusing doubling of the name Ecbatana, which causes Cambyses to misunderstand the oracle from Buto.⁴⁴ But what is the function of the other detail, which Herodotus actually presents first and then repeats, that of the extremely close (μάλιστα) physical resemblance between the two? At first, this detail may foster the expectation that the Magus Smerdis will actually impersonate the royal Smerdis, relying on their physical resemblance to pass for the prince with his subjects.⁴⁵ In fact, nothing of the sort materialises.⁴⁶ Instead, Smerdis keeps secluded from his subjects (3.68.2) and remains unseen even by his (inherited) wives (3.68.4), with

⁴² Gould (2003) 301.

⁴³ The dream that visits Cambyses is designed to facilitate this confusion, as Cambyses does not see the usurper for himself, but a messenger comes and reports that 'Smerdis' sits on the throne (Köhnken (1980) 44–7; de Jong (2006) 6).

⁴⁴ Scholars regularly compare the misleading dream and the Buto oracle; e.g., Brown (1982) 400; de Jong (2006) 11.

⁴⁵ Indeed, just such an impersonation plot can be found in Ctesias' version of events in the *Persica* (*FGrHist* 688 F 13 §§11–13 = F 13 §§11–13 Lenfant); cf. Justin 1.9.

⁴⁶ Thus Waters' mistake ((1971) 56 n. 28) is understandable when he assumes that it 'of course was essential' that the two Smerdises resemble each other in appearance as well as name; but the narrative does not bear out this assumption.

Patizeithes functioning as an intermediary between the pretender king and the outside world.⁴⁷ Thus the herald who announces Smerdis' claim to power indicates that he has not seen Smerdis himself for some time, receiving orders only through the steward of the house (3.63.2). What is more, it eventually turns out that the Magus could not have passed for the son of Cyrus for a simple reason: the Magus' ears had been cut off (3.69.5)! The two lookalikes turn out to be visually distinct after all.⁴⁸ As such, the detail of their similar appearance seems to play no role in the progression of the plot. And to make matters worse, in the Behistun inscription, whose account in some form or another serves as the basis for Herodotus' narrative,⁴⁹ Cambyses' brother and the usurper have different names, and there is no mention of physical resemblance.⁵⁰ This odd detail may well be a Herodotean innovation, if not that of one of his sources. What is it doing in the *Histories*?

Much like Cambyses' missing Apis' stomach, this seemingly inert detail can be explained by Gould's principle that the uncanny suggests that something divine is afoot. The resemblance between the prince and the usurper is too unlikely a coincidence to have any other explanation. As such, the resemblance functions like a sort of divine signature, guaranteeing that the coup of the Magi owes to a divine cause. Once that much is established, the question again becomes which god is responsible, and why. Two considerations apply to this question. First, the usurpation plays an important role in the economy of the gods' vengeance: it is one of the misfortunes that Cambyses laments,⁵¹ and the gods wait for him to learn of it before they contrive his self-stabbing, just as he prepares to ride for Susa and oust the interlopers (3.64.2). Agency is thereby stripped from the king at his would-be moment of action. Second, it is likely that the god who arranged for the two Smerdises to resemble each other so closely is the same god who exploits the ambiguity created by their shared name in Cambyses' misleading dream. Thus the coup itself may reasonably be added to the other elements of Cambyses' punishment surveyed so far. And if this is so, then it follows that the gods did

⁴⁷ In Darius' 'official' account in the Behistun inscription, there is only one Magus usurper, not a pair of brothers. de Jong (2006) 11 shrewdly observes that Patizeithes' function in Herodotus' narrative is to play this intermediary role, allowing Smerdis to remain unseen as he claimed the prince's identity; cf. Köhnken (1980) 47–8.

⁴⁸ Cf. Asheri (2007) ad 3.61.2.

⁴⁹ On the relationship between the Behistun inscription and Herodotus' narrative, see, e.g., Köhnken (1980); Balcer (1987); Briant (2002) 97–106.

⁵⁰ Asheri (2007) ad 3.61.2.

⁵¹ Cf. 3.64.2 (*περιημεκτήσας τῇ ἀπάσῃ συμφορῇ*) and 3.64.5 (*τῆς συμφορῆς τῆς τε ἐκ τοῦ μάγου*).

intend for the dream to be misinterpreted and to result in the self-destructive fratricide to which Cambyses succumbs.

The Realisation

The picture of the gods' revenge on Cambyses is nearly complete, but it still lacks one finishing touch: Cambyses' recovery of his sanity on receiving his wound. This was hardly a necessary element in Cambyses' story. For instance, the mad Spartan king Cleomenes, whose representation in the *Histories* is closely parallel to that of Cambyses, remains delirious to the end (6.75).⁵² Herodotus presents an almost medical explanation of Cambyses' recovery through 'shock' (3.64.5):

καὶ δὴ ὡς τότε ἐπειρόμενος ἐπύθετο τῆς πόλιος τὸ οὖνομα, ὑπὸ τῆς συμφορῆς τῆς τε ἐκ τοῦ μάγου ἐκπεπληγμένος καὶ τοῦ τρώματος ἐσωφρόνησε, συλλαβὼν δὲ τὸ θεοπρόπιον εἶπε· ἐνθαῦτα Καμβύσεια τὸν Κύρου ἐστὶ πεπρωμένον τελευτᾶν.

So when he now inquired and learned the name of the town, the shock of his wound, and of the misfortune that came to him from the Magus, brought him to his senses; he understood the prophecy and said: 'Here Cambyses son of Cyrus is to die.'

But the diction of this explanation perhaps points to another, higher cause for the end of the madness. In particular, Cambyses comes to his senses when he is metaphorically struck (*ἐκπεπληγμένος*) by his misfortunes, both that of the usurpation and that of his wounding (*ὑπὸ τῆς συμφορῆς τῆς τε ἐκ τοῦ μάγου ... καὶ τοῦ τρώματος*). In the same vein, just moments earlier Cambyses had been 'struck' by the truth both of his dream and of Prexaspes' deduction of the usurper's true identity (*ἔτυψε ἢ ἀληθείη τῶν τε λόγων καὶ τοῦ ἐνυπνίου*, 3.64.1). At the same time, related forms of these words for (metaphorical) striking are also applied to Cambyses' literal stabbing of the Apis bull and of himself in close succession (*τρωματισθεὶς δὲ κατὰ τωὐτὸ τῇ αὐτὸς πρότερον τὸν τῶν Αἰγυπτίων θεὸν Ἄπιν ἔπληξε, ὡς οἱ καιρίη ἔδοξε τετύφθαι*, 3.64.3). This scene finds Cambyses buffeted by blows both physical and mental, and the former of these, at least, represents divine vengeance. Could the intellectual blows that cure Cambyses' madness, a seeming mercy, be at one and the same time a type of punitive violence issued by the same gods who had stricken Cambyses with madness to begin with?

⁵² On the similarities between Cambyses and Cleomenes, see Griffiths (1989) 70–1, complete with a table of parallels.

If so, this final punishment is particularly cruel. The immediate significance of Cambyses' recovery is that he now understands from the Buto oracle that he is shortly destined to die (3.64.5). But Cambyses' newfound sanity also underlies his forthcoming speech to the chief Persians, in which the king reveals the truth of Smerdis' murder, admits his responsibility for the crime, and calls for action to recover the throne. It is as if the gods in their anger have lifted the veil of madness from Cambyses' eyes long enough for him to appreciate the full extent of his ruin and culpability.

I make this suggestion tentatively, because evidently Cambyses can already weep for his brother Smerdis and his misfortune once he realises the truth of his dream, even before his madness is dispelled (3.64.2). Nevertheless, the pain of these revelations must cut deeper without the buffer of madness between Cambyses and the reality and gravity of his actions. Ordinarily, the cessation of madness would be a gift,⁵³ and Cambyses tries to use his last moments of lucidity to stir the Persians to action before his death (3.65). But his words have no effect on the narrative (3.66.3).⁵⁴ Rather, the real effect of this last-minute turn to sanity is, apparently, to ensure that the anguish effected by the gods' various other punishments can pierce the king's spirit with full force. In the days leading up to his death, the gods compel Cambyses at last to take long, painful, and sober stock of his actions.

Tragedy

Thus far, I have argued that the latter half of the Cambyses *logos*, from his slaughter of the Apis bull to his own death in Syrian Ecbatana, can be understood as a unified sequence of divine vengeance engineered by the gods. This intricate plot includes far more than just Cambyses' mortal thigh wound. Much earlier in the narrative, the gods also visit him with madness and a deceptive dream that together stimulate him to commit the terrible crime of fratricide. This crime leads directly to a series of circumstances—the usurpation, the lack of kin to avenge him, and childlessness—that grieve Cambyses terribly in his final moments. What is more, the gods may even be behind Cambyses' regaining his wits in his last days, the better for him to grasp the extent of his own culpability and to feel the enormity of his losses.

⁵³ Croesus offers an apt comparison: although he was never properly 'mad', his moment of enlightenment on the pyre and subsequent cries of 'Solon!' ultimately lead to his salvation (1.86).

⁵⁴ This inefficacy may itself be considered a part of the punishment, as very likely the Persians' scepticism is rooted in Cambyses' reputation for madness and violence. As a nameless Persian observes elsewhere, 'It is the most hateful thing for a person to have much knowledge and no power' (*ἐχθίστη δὲ ὀδύνη ἐστὶ τῶν ἐν ἀνθρώποισι αὐτή, πολλὰ φρονέοντα μηδενὸς κρατέειν*, 9.16.5).

Before moving on, I would like to ponder briefly the theology that this scheme of divine revenge presupposes. Certainly, the execution of such a complex design is a testament to the power and foreknowledge of the gods. Indeed, a chilling corollary to this argument may be observed: if the gods did arrange for the two Smerdises to resemble each other, then they must have been planning Cambyses' punishment for many years—long before he had actually committed any crime to merit it. Indeed, to arrange for these two unrelated men to resemble each other so closely and to bear the same name, the gods must have been plotting their vengeance since before either man was born! The virtual omnipotence and omniscience that the narrative presupposes for the gods is counterbalanced by the helpless condition of the all-too-human Cambyses. He is subject to seemingly chance accidents, in control neither of his mind nor at times his own hand, in his ignorance and confusion repeatedly acting against his own interests even as he believes he is securing his hold on power.

In a word, the Cambyses *logos* operates according to a theology recognisable from much of Attic tragedy. The 'tragic' qualities of the narrative have long been noted, from such motifs as the king's sudden reversal of fortune (*περιπέτεια*), the misunderstood oracle, and the unwitting mistake (*ἀμαρτία*)—in this case, fratricide inspired by a mistaken dream-interpretation—to the story's themes of divine retribution, human frailty, and 'learning too late' (*ὀψιμαθία*).⁵⁵ Cambyses' impiety is particularly reminiscent of certain Euripidean figures, such as his Bellerophon and Pentheus.⁵⁶ Moreover, several aspects of Cambyses' punishment are comparable to punishments found in extant tragedy,⁵⁷ but perhaps the best analogy is with Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*.⁵⁸ The sheer complexity of the execution of the punishments that

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Pearson (1954) 138; Huber (1965) 12–13; Chiasson (1979) 134, 138–9, 214; Balcer (1987) ch. 3; Erbse (1992) 55; Saïd (2002) 130–1; de Jong (2006) 13–15.

⁵⁶ For further parallels between Euripides' *Bacchae* and the Cambyses *logos*, see the next note as well as below, n. 70.

⁵⁷ E.g., Fohl (1913) 15 n. 39 compares Cambyses' death by thigh wound, in the same place where he had stabbed Apis, to Electra's determination to murder Clytemnestra with the same axe she had used to kill Agamemnon (Eur. *El.* 279). Cambyses' recovery of his wits in Ecbatana is similar to that of Agave (Eur. *Bacch.* 1259–96) and also Pentheus if, as MacLeod (2008) argues, he snaps out of his maddened state and realises his mistakes before the Bacchants tear him apart.

⁵⁸ The affinities between Herodotus' and Sophocles' worldviews and works are commonly noted; see, e.g., Chiasson (1979) 54–66, 211–16; Ostwald (2002). Perhaps relevant in this connection is the tradition of friendship between the two authors, which is possibly reflected in an epigram preserved by Plutarch (*An seni* 3, 785B); see the discussion of Jacoby (1913) 232–7. For a comparison between the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and another Herodotean *logos*, that of Croesus, Atys, and Adrastus, see Manuwald (1991).

befall Cambyses and Oedipus are rivalled only by the elaborate machinations of Aphrodite in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. But unlike in that play, the gods of Herodotus and Sophocles are distant and invisible, their presence made known only by a series of unlikely coincidences that point to the workings of a vast divine machinery arrayed against an unwitting mortal target. What is particularly striking is the sense in both narratives that human errors seem to fulfil divine plans long in the making—plans that, paradoxically, anticipate Cambyses' crime and even Oedipus' birth! But there is also a major difference between these two tragic protagonists. Whereas the question of Oedipus' guilt or innocence is a vexed one, there can be no question of Cambyses' wrongdoing.⁵⁹ As with Troy, so with the Persian king: 'retribution from the gods for terrible wrongdoing is also terrible'.

II. The Irony of the Punishment

Herodotus himself, however, explicitly attaches a different moral to the Cambyses *logos*, one that is much more specific to the king's particular experiences, when he argues that only a madman would set himself to deride religion and custom (3.38). Herodotus' thesis is well-known and cited frequently, but to understand this moral and how it relates to its context in the Cambyses *logos*, the historian's ascription of madness to Cambyses must first be scrutinised. Clearly, some of Cambyses' 'mad acts' listed in 3.30–7 are straightforwardly 'mad', in the sense that they reflect genuine mental derangement. His murderous overreaction to his sister-wife's criticism (3.31–2)⁶⁰ and his shooting of Prexaspes' son (3.34–5) have already been mentioned; another story provides a revealing glimpse into the twisted logic by which Cambyses governs, and how the members of his court strive to anticipate and provide against it. When, in another homicidal outburst, the king orders a group of attendants to put his trusted adviser Croesus to death, they rightly predict that Cambyses would later regret his absence, and so they keep him in hiding. When, inevitably, Cambyses does miss his adviser, he is glad to learn that he is still alive, but puts the attendants to death anyway for failing to execute his command (3.36).

In other cases, though, Cambyses' 'mad acts' seem more 'foolish' than properly 'mad', especially his more or less mundane misunderstanding of a divinely-sent dream, which leads to his brother's (politically-motivated)

⁵⁹ For a penetrating analysis of the role of the gods in the *OT* that explores many of the aspects touched on here, see Cairns (2013), with 147–59 for the debate over moralising interpretations of Oedipus' punishment.

⁶⁰ Cf. 3.35.5, a draconian punishment of twelve noble Persian families on a flimsy pretext.

assassination. In his own words, the newly sane Cambyses says of his fratricide, ‘I acted with more haste than wisdom’ (ἐποίησα ταχύτερα ἢ σοφώτερα, 3.65.3) and, ‘I mistook altogether what was to be’ (πάντως δὲ τοῦ μέλλοντος ἔσεσθαι ἀμαρτῶν, 3.65.4). And indeed, several other autocrats in the *Histories* make similar mistakes of interpretation and even parallel Cambyses’ more irrational crimes, but evidently Herodotus does not consider them mad.⁶¹ And yet the historian does imply that Cambyses’ madness is the reason why he misunderstands the dream and, later, the oracle from Buto. The dream visits Cambyses only after he has become mad from his crime against Apis (3.30.1–2), and Herodotus specifies that Cambyses understands the Buto oracle only after snapping back to sanity (3.64.5). But it does not take a mad king to assume that the name of one’s brother or capital city refer to those familiar entities, only a hasty one.⁶² Unless all the other autocrats are also somewhat mad (cf. 3.80.3), it seems that Cambyses’ madness is an over-determining factor in his downfall.

Indeed, despite Herodotus’ remarkable insistence on his madness,⁶³ Cambyses lacks most of the symptoms, particularly hallucination and delirium, that are associated with the affliction in the medical writers and elsewhere in Greek literature, especially tragedy.⁶⁴ For instance, he does not imagine sheep to be men, like Sophocles’ Ajax, or misrecognise his loved ones as enemies, as Euripides’ Heracles does.⁶⁵ Actually, not only is Cambyses hardly delirious, he often seems to be on the opposite end of the spectrum, overly rationalistic. Daniel Selden puts it well: ‘Herodotus’ Cambyses resembles nothing so much as a dark double of the Greek rationalist: not unlike Xenophanes, he scoffs at traditional myth and religion, rejects social convention, and embodies absolute freedom of action and thought’.⁶⁶ The question is, in what sense does such behaviour constitute madness, as

⁶¹ For instance, in the juxtaposed Corinthian *logos* alone, Periander’s uxoricide is a clear parallel (3.50).

⁶² Cf. Kirchberg (1965) 31–2, *contra* Erbse (1992) 55, who assumes that Cambyses’ misunderstandings owe to his madness.

⁶³ As Munson (1991) 50 with n. 10 points out, only Cambyses and Cleomenes are called mad in the *Histories* in the narrator’s own voice.

⁶⁴ See Munson (1991) 54.

⁶⁵ Thus, despite their resemblances, I would qualify assertions such as ‘mad Cambyses ... can stand beside raving Io and Heracles and Pentheus (*Prometheus Vincetus*, *Heracles*, *Bacchae*)’ (Griffin (2006) 48). Cambyses is mad, but his symptoms are rather different.

⁶⁶ Selden (1999) 62–3; cf. West (1999) 123. At the same time, Cambyses represents something of a ‘dark double’ of the historian himself as a ‘perverted *histor*’ (Munson (1991) 62). On his crimes against *nomoi* as ethnological experimentation taken too far, see Munson (1991) 59–62; Christ (1994) 180–2, 186–7; Provencal (2015) 232.

Herodotus defines it in the moral of the *logos*: ‘It is not therefore to be supposed that anyone, except a madman, would turn such things [τὰ ἰρά and τὰ νομαῖα] to ridicule’ (οὐκ ὦν οἰκός ἐστι ἄλλον γε ἢ μαινόμενον ἄνδρα γέλωτα τὰ τοιαῦτα τίθεσθαι, 3.38.2).⁶⁷

If Cambyses is not mad by the standards of other Greek writers, perhaps that is because in the Cambyses *logos*, Herodotus is playing with the notion of madness in some innovative ways. In particular, if madness is a delusion about the nature of the world, then ironically, Cambyses’ madness appears to consist not in non-rationality, but rather in a sort of hyper-rationality. His scepticism overshoots the mark and leaves him blind to the ‘irrational’ aspects of the world and of the gods. This variety of madness appears to originate with Herodotus, but it has echoes elsewhere in Greek literature, particularly in Euripidean tragedy. For example, Hippolytus rejects the ‘madness’ of love but in so doing neglects a significant realm of the human experience to his ultimate ruin. Cambyses is especially similar to Pentheus of the *Bacchae*, a king opposed to a strange, foreign cult on rationalistic grounds and yet ‘mad’⁶⁸ as well as foolish⁶⁹ precisely because his seemingly reasonable critiques of Dionysian religion are, in fact, wrong—as Pentheus soon learns when he is destroyed, like Cambyses, by the very real power of the god he had violently opposed.⁷⁰

In the *Histories*, the Apis incident is exceptionally well-suited to provoke and expose Cambyses’ hyper-rational madness. As symbols of the irrational parts of the world, Egypt and Apis in particular represent everything about reality that Cambyses the sneering sceptic cannot accept. Here is a land that is in a fundamental sense upside-down, the reverse of all others—as Herodotus puts it, the Egyptians have ‘instituted customs and laws contrary for the most part to those of the rest of mankind’ (τὰ πολλὰ πάντα ἔμπαλιν τοῖσι ἄλλοισι ἀνθρώποισι ἐστήσαντο ἥθεά τε καὶ νόμους, 2.35.2). This means that Egypt has *nomoi* that can stupefy foreigners of almost all stripes, such that of all nations, Egypt represents the greatest challenge to any proponent of cultural sensitivity or tolerance. For a man like Cambyses, who does not even respect his own nation’s *nomoi* (cf. 3.16.2–3, 31), how much more absurd will he find those of the Egyptians! The worship of animals as gods as in the Apis cult—so baffling to the Greeks, at any rate—is a case in point.⁷¹ Egypt and the temple of Apis

⁶⁷ Cf. Selden (1999) 49: ‘Conspicuously, Herodotus’ judgment here [in 3.38] appeals neither to divinity nor to any set of universal scientific norms, but locates madness anthropologically as a particular relationship to culture’.

⁶⁸ Eur. *Bacch.* 326, 359, 399–401, 885–7, 944–8, 999–1000; cf. 1150.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 196, 269, 311, 369, 395–6, 483–4, 490; cf. 329, 792.

⁷⁰ For several intriguing parallels between the Cambyses *logos* and Euripides’ *Bacchae*, see Wesselmann (2011) 100–4.

⁷¹ Cf. Brown (1982) 397 n. 32; West (1999) 123; Scullion (2006) 201.

in Memphis thus provide the perfect backdrop and outlet for Cambyses' hyper-rational madness to show through. Read in this light, the juvenile Cambyses' promise to 'turn all Egypt upside down' (*Αἰγύπτου τὰ μὲν ἄνω κάτω θήσω, τὰ δὲ κάτω ἄνω*, 3.3) takes on an ominous new meaning, as if Cambyses believes that by overturning the Egyptians' backward customs, he is actually setting them aright, as they should be.⁷²

The narrative of the Apis incident foregrounds the role of Cambyses' hyper-rationality in what must be his worst offense against custom. Cambyses' anger against the Apis cult already derives from cultural misunderstanding, when he interprets the Egyptians' festal joy at the god's epiphany as a celebration of his own recent setbacks en route to Ethiopia (3.27.2). When he hears the explanation for the Egyptians' behaviour, despite its accuracy, he cannot accept it, and punishes the rulers of Memphis who gave it with death (3.27.3). Then, when Cambyses finally accepts that the Egyptians do worship the Apis bull, he decides to administer a test of its divinity, stabbing it to see if it can be wounded. But Cambyses' test only makes sense from a non-Egyptian perspective in which there can be no overlap between the categories of god and animal, divinity and vulnerability.⁷³ And when, predictably, the Egyptian god fails this un-Egyptian test, Cambyses laughs and mocks Apis' priests (3.29.2):

ὦ κακαὶ κεφαλαί, τοιοῦτοι θεοὶ γίνονται, ἔναιμοί τε καὶ σαρκώδεις καὶ ἐπαῖοντες σιδηρίων; ἄξιός μὲν γε Αἰγυπτίων οὗτός γε ὁ θεός· ἀτὰρ τοὶ ὑμεῖς γε οὐ χαίροντες γέλωτα ἐμὲ θήσεσθε.

Simpletons, are these your gods, creatures of flesh and blood that can feel weapons of iron? That is a god worthy of the Egyptians. But as for you, you shall suffer for making me your laughing-stock.

For the Persian king, the Egyptians have confused what is truly laughable, a divine bull calf, with what is worthy of reverence, their Persian conqueror. And so he vents his frustration with further violence, scourging the priests and sentencing to death any Egyptian caught celebrating the epiphany (3.29.3). But, of course, divine punishment for these sacrileges proves Cambyses and his rationalistic assumptions quite wrong.

Cambyses' misunderstanding of the Buto oracle and especially of his dream parallel his misunderstanding of Apis' hybrid nature. When Cambyses hears the name Smerdis in his dream, he does not imagine that in fact there could be two men named Smerdis to whom the warning might refer, much

⁷² Cf. Munson (1999) 55.

⁷³ Cf. Georges (1994) 192–3.

less that these men are near-identical *Doppelgängers*. His worldview affirms a tidy, one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified, with indeterminacy and confusion kept to a minimum. And this assumption betokens another great irony in Cambyses' misunderstanding, because the perception of doubles is in fact one of the standard symptoms of madness in the Greco-Roman cultural imagination. Richard Seaford collects several passages illustrating this fact,⁷⁴ but the most important (because closest in time to Herodotus) is the famous scene from Euripides' *Bacchae* in which Pentheus first emerges in his Bacchant costume, by now firmly under Dionysus' spell. His first utterance on returning to the stage is to report that he sees twin suns and two cities of Thebes, as well as hallucinating a bull in place of Dionysus (918–22). Pentheus is said to be out of his mind at this moment (850–3; cf. 981, 999), and later authors would make this passage a standard citation for double vision as a sign of madness.⁷⁵

Yet in Cambyses' case, the doubling is not in his mind but a fact of the world: what should be one in a rationalistic universe has been doubled in implausible and confusing ways. Cambyses' misidentification of the right Smerdis and the right Ecbatana thus illustrates his 'inverted' brand of hyper-rational madness: he sees one where really there are two. Indeed, this sort of irony is at the heart of the Cambyses *logos*, as a comparison with the same scene in the *Bacchae* shows: whereas the mad Pentheus hallucinates a bull in place of Dionysus, ironically, Cambyses' *failure* to perceive a bull as a god is an index of his madness. Put differently, the world and the gods that produce these double figures and bull gods are in a sense 'madder' than Cambyses himself, and Cambyses' own madness consists in his failure to seize on this fact and synchronise his worldview with the irrationality inherent in the cosmos. The mad king bested by madder gods in a madder world—this is a vicious sort of irony indeed, one which only adds to the impression of the gods' spitefulness in this narrative.⁷⁶

But this irony also serves an important thematic and didactic function, and so I would like to conclude by returning to the avowed moral of the Cambyses *logos*, that it is madness to deride *nomoi*. Herodotus' reasoning for this claim is that people everywhere value their own customs the most (3.38.1). That is, as

⁷⁴ Seaford (1987) 76.

⁷⁵ See Seaford (1987) 76 n. 2.

⁷⁶ I here avail myself of a modern metaphor, though to my knowledge the ancient Greeks would not attribute *μανία* to the world in the same way that we might. To state the case more precisely and less poetically: the Herodotean narrative externalises some of the standard symptoms of madness, presenting them as empirical facts rather than as the mad king's delusions, but ironically, it is precisely Cambyses' failure to apprehend these facts that proves his madness.

David Asheri explains more fully, '[Herodotus] draws the conclusion that there is no objective measure for rating the merits and demerits of each culture; that therefore diversity deserves respect; and finally, that although "customs" are very different on a universal level, their authority is absolute and undisputed within each culture'.⁷⁷ Cambyses' paradoxical brand of hyper-rational madness is consonant with this principle, because the king's fatal lesson is that the foreign *nomoi* that he scoffs at turn out to be founded in truth. Because there is no objective standard for assessing the validity of *nomoi*, one needs an open mind to avoid the error of rejecting the seemingly irrational facets of the world. Even a custom as apparently silly to many Greeks as the worship of a bull calf may in fact be more attuned to the nature of reality than the sceptic's mockery of that custom, as Cambyses' fate amply demonstrates. The world does not always operate according to human assumptions and logic, especially where religion and the gods are concerned, and this fact calls for a great deal of humility in evaluating the customs of other nations. What is needed, in other words, is the (largely) respectful and cosmopolitan perspective that informs Herodotean ethnography.

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⁷⁷ Asheri (2007) ad 3.38.1.

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