

## The Middle Path of the Epic Hero: Diomedes in the *Iliad*

The traditional traits of an epic hero are visible all throughout the *Iliad*, and have discussed at great length in scholarship (I primarily refer to Nagy's recent 2013 work, as well as his deeper 1999 treatment): a physically powerful warrior, often assisted by the gods, who seeks eternal glory through his combat prowess and is deeply concerned with honor and reputation. Achilles famously exemplifies these traits, as do Hector, Ajax, Menelaus, and even Agamemnon. Odysseus represents an adaptation of the traditional hero, as argued by Stanford (1968). This second style of heroism is often in tension with the first, since it relies on trickiness, stealth, and skill with words in the place of straightforward brawn and a desire for battlefield glory. Then there's Diomedes, whom I believe excels in both categories. In this paper I'll detail the many ways Diomedes confidently operates as a hero with both physical prowess and sneaky tricks, and argue that the two heroic archetypes are not mutually exclusive.

Most of the previous scholarship I've found on Diomedes has dealt with his actions and legacy before and after the Trojan war, his reception in later texts and authors (especially Roman ones), and analysis of specific anecdotes from within the *Iliad*. There are some character studies of Diomedes through the whole poem, like Martin's (1999), but they typically explore different aspects of Diomedes' character than his role as a hero. In conducting my character analysis, I will primarily lean on Nagy and Stanford's descriptions of the two archetypes of heroism along with Schofield's (1986) nuanced understanding of intelligence in heroic society.

Concerning Diomedes' fulfillment of traditional heroic traits, his strength in combat is a given: his *aristeia* in Book 5, in which he defeats many mortals and even wounds two gods, leaves no room for doubt. However, even during this ultimate heroic achievement, Diomedes

still has no issue taking sneaky and tricky courses of actions. For instance, he asks Sthenelus to steal Aeneas' horses during his combat with Aeneas (*Il.* 5.260-265), and when swapping armor with Glaucus, Diomedes receives a golden set while only offering bronze (*Il.* 6.119-236).

Diomedes has no shortage of honor, but he's also more able to put aside concerns about his reputation than other heroes. For instance, while it takes Agamemnon 9 books and a catastrophic rout to swallow his pride, Diomedes promptly listens to Nestor's advice to retreat instead of confronting Hector against Zeus' wishes and, despite having misgivings about Hector calling him a coward, nevertheless withdraws (*Il.* 8.133-171).

We also see Diomedes' willingness to be a sneakier, cleverer hero even outside the context of the battlefield. Diomedes also demonstrates great skill with words, as when he convinces all the Greeks, including Agamemnon, to stay at Troy and fight (*Il.* 9.30-51). This scene is especially notable because Nestor spends almost half of his own, subsequent speech praising Diomedes' wisdom and advice (*Il.* 9.52-80). Here we see Diomedes combine the traditional heroic trait of fighting inspiration with the less traditional one of skilled public speaking. The keystone episode of Diomedes as a stealthy hero, though, is the Doloneia in book 10. Even in the face of Agamemnon's encouragement and gift offering, the assembled heroes—including Odysseus—are reluctant to volunteer for a stealthy spy mission until Diomedes steps forward. His conduct during that mission is even farther from typical heroic combat: Diomedes kills an unarmed man after promising his safety, then proceeds to the Thracian camp to kill the sleeping troops and steal their horses. Notably, it's Diomedes doing the killing, while Odysseus takes care of the bodies and the horses (*Il.* 10.476-493). Here we see the reverse situation of Diomedes' inspiring speech as he incorporates his battlefield strength into his stealth mission. Diomedes needs no convincing nor does he express distaste for what he's doing, he just goes

about the task with the blessing of Athena. Throughout the Iliad, Diomedes not only demonstrates the characteristics of both the traditional, battlefield model of heroism and the stealthy, clever model, he even combines elements of both simultaneously, and in doing so walks a middle path between the two long-opposed archetypes.

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