VERGILIAN DIOMEDES REVISITED:
THE RE-EVALUATION OF THE Iliad

BY

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Book 8 of the Aeneid opens with the Rutulian decision to send an embassy to ‘the city of Diomedes’ (Aen. 8.9) and ask the hero to join their cause. This Diomedes is indeed the celebrated Greek Homeric hero. Vergil refers briefly to Diomedes a few times in the first two books of the epic,¹ yet nowhere is there a specific mention of his presence in Italy. Specifically, the portrayal of Italian Diomedes, as it is featured mainly in Aen. 11.225 ff., and its significance will be the center of my discussion in this article. Vergil’s decision to set on the stage of his Roman epic Diomedes among all Greek warriors from Aeneas’ Trojan past was, among others, addressing two main reasons. First, Diomedes and Aeneas shared a striking number of biographical details, both in their performance in the Iliad as well as in their course of adventures following the end of the Trojan War. Like Aeneas, Vergil’s Diomedes is a complex character. He represents a collation of qualities reminiscent of Achilles (the old, past, dead world of traditional epic), but also of Latinus and the native Italians (the peaceful side of the present world of Italy) and Aeneas (the future ruler of Italy and ancestor of the Romans). Secondly, Diomedes in the Iliad shares many qualities with the best of the Achaeans, Achilles, Aeneas’ prototype in the second half of the epic, and during our hero’s assumption of his new identity of the leader. The appearance of a transformed Diomedes who turns his back to glories past and refuses to become a substitute Achilles in an Italian copy of the Trojan War, summarizes appropriately the political and cultural messages of the Aeneid. Just like Aeneas, Diomedes is a changed character, a character of Vergil’s own times, with a new role that addresses the new political reality of Roman domination and the public welcoming of Greek cultural influence by the Augustan intellectual milieu.

¹ 1.96-9; 469-73; 750-2; 2.162-8; 195-8.
I shall begin my discussion by outlining, first, the striking parallels in the Homeric and post-Homeric adventures of Aeneas and Diomedes. I shall then focus on Diomedes’ presence in the Aeneid, which I divide into two sections. In the first section I examine all Vergilian references to the hero outside Book 11; the second section focuses on his speech in Book 11, and contrasts it to his Homeric persona. During my discussion of both Homeric and Vergilian Diomedes, I highlight the hero’s constant assimilation to Achilles. Yet, my lengthier discussion of Diomedes’ reply to the Rutulian embassy in Book 11 underscores the change in mentality of Italian Diomedes, a change which obeys the new, Vergilian description of post-Homeric balance of power, that appoints the Romans and not the Greeks to leadership. Disguised behind the mandates of fate Vergil’s contemporary political reality of Rome’s worldwide domination transfers upon Aeneas, and not upon Diomedes, the role of aliis Achilles, and appoints the Roman hero as leader, political but also cultural, of the united, changed world of Greeks and Trojans/Romans—for-merly enemies and now allies.

Pre-Vergilian Diomedes—The Iliad

Diomedes’ performance in the Trojan War was perilous for the Trojans, and particularly for Aeneas. He was the only Greek warrior who wounded the son of Anchises in the Iliad (5.239 ff.). The latter would certainly have died had it not been for the intervention of his divine mother first and then of Apollo (Il. 5.311-430). This episode anticipates the scene in 20.325-7, when Aeneas faces again imminent danger to his life, this time from Achilles. A second divine intervention, this time Poseidon’s, saves again the hero’s life. Moreover, in this particular scene the god of the sea prophesies for Aeneas and his descendants a glorious future which includes assumption of the succession to the throne of post-Homeric Troy (Il. 20.302-7).

It is not only this structural parallel, however, that brings Diomedes close to Achilles and Aeneas. The Argive’s military performance, leadership, bravery, as well as his ‘madness’ (μανίη) during the battle, considered together with the injuries he inflicted upon the Trojans, link the hero to Achilles in the Iliad.2) In 5.85-94, for example,

2) See Fenik 1968: 9, on the structural similarities between these two passages.