

## The Eighth Labor – The Mares of Diomedes

There are a number of versions of the eighth Labor, a rather gristly myth, but the general outline goes like this. King Diomedes of Thrace, a son of Ares, and a giant, owned four ferocious horses with a taste for human flesh. The horses were so wild they had to be secured with an iron chain to their brass cribs. When newcomers appeared in his land, Diomedes would innocently invite them in and then feed them to his horses. Heracles was assigned by King Eurystheus to capture the horses and deliver them to him. He first killed Diomedes and fed him to his own horses, who then became somewhat tame, allowing Heracles to lead them to the king and complete his task.

To understand the inner story we have to imagine what those weird man-eating creatures represent. Horses epitomize both power and an independent spirit that is explosively wild. While not the same, the two are quite compatible and often are found together. King Diomedes, then, is obsessed with both. That he is the son of the war god, Ares, and a giant, gives us a further hint that he is an archetypal power-mad person in a position of rulership, who maintains at best very insubstantial reins on his willfulness. The myth, then, is about the hazards of power.

The murderous horses are tied with unbreakable iron chains to cribs of brass, so it is impossible for them to escape. Brass—imitation gold—also has an association with military power, quite probably the most intractable form of human power there is. Modern corporate business structures trend ever closer to the military model. The whole image is of rigidly constrained fatal forces. Being terminated at the pleasure of an employer when you don't submit to their chains amounts to a bloodless form of assassination.

Diomedes feeds newcomers to his power-horses, meaning that innocent interlopers are sacrificed to the appetites of power as a matter of course (pun intended). Those who are trusting and politically naïve in the presence of an autocrat are destined for an

unhappy end, as they are manipulated for their nefarious schemes without the slightest twinge of conscience. Machiavelli has written the final word about this practicality in *The Prince* and elsewhere, nearly 500 years ago. Here's a typical quote: "Men are so simple and so much inclined to obey immediate needs that a deceiver will never lack victims for his deceptions." Diomedes' heirs remain widespread in the halls of business and government in the twenty-first century.

Outside of a purely military context, many powerful people are polite and genteel on the outside but seethe with hatred and resentment inside. While the deception is confounding to the credulous, a savvy person is not deceived, so the malice consumes its host instead. In that light, when Heracles, the wide-awake embodiment of justice, arrives, he kills Diomedes and feeds him to his own creatures. The hero acts as an embodiment of karma in restoring the natural balance, and the host is literally consumed.

Power does not *need* to abuse everyone, but the lust for vengeance that lurks within its dispensers drives some of them to *enjoy* meting out suffering. Even when the powerful maintain a veneer of civility, it very likely cloaks a boiling animosity that threatens to burst forth at any moment, and winds up being exercised behind closed doors. While a cataclysmic denouement is not absolutely foreordained, it is frequently the outcome.

The eighth Labor offers the hopeful notion that unbridled power will destroy those who wield it, especially if it is staunchly resisted. Being "hoist with your own petard" doesn't require a heroic figure to bring it about; it's pretty much the natural order. "All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword," as Jesus put it. The king's sycophants are regularly sacrificed as scapegoats for him, but at last he has to follow suit. So Diomedes ends up masticated by his own monsters. Heracles represents the urge for justice that hopefully can hasten the process, preferably without recourse to violence, though the Greeks were realists in that regard.

"It generally has a salutary effect if brutality is given a dose of its own medicine," as Dr. Mees puts it, in his *Revelation in the*

*Wilderness.* In war there is always a buildup of unilateral enmity, like a violent thunderstorm, which then releases its energy in a lethal paroxysm, followed by a period of calm. The alternation of tension and release leading to satiety underlies much of human endeavor, including art, sport, politics, and historical evolution. Once the intensity has consumed its subjects it loses its strength, because it is wholly dependent on them. The longer the tension is sustained by the dominant elite, the greater the subsequent collapse. In art, at least, the alternation is a way to sustain interest, but in politics, minimizing its amplitude would be far less destructive.

The desire for domination can be understood as a compensation for a childhood where the soul, which intuitively knows it is a spark of immeasurable greatness, is compressed and made to feel tiny, insignificant, and even illegitimate. The developing psyche uses various strategies to combat this monumental injustice, generally either becoming introverted and tractable, or craving extroversion and authority. The child's strategy often resembles Nataraja Guru's image of a small man trying to jump on the back of a horse: not enough effort and he falls back to the starting point, too much and he sails right over to the other side. A yogi controls the effort with expertise and so lands exactly in the horse's back. The trick is to begin with a burst of energy, but then hold it in check just enough.

Success is an advanced technique, not likely for a child without lots of assistance. Overcompensation is more or less common for a standard abusive upbringing, where the ego is regularly thwarted. For children raised with balance—respect without exaggeration—it's as if they have been offered a "leg up" on the horse of their destiny. For those reared as budding aristocrats, encouraged in their conceits of superiority, it is as if they are being catapulted onto their chosen mount. They need to find a way to hold back or they will soar far over their objective to land in a heap. Thus, dealing with power intelligently is everyone's problem, not just the military brass and corporate politicians.

Those untethered psyches that get their seats by deceit, become drunk with power and lose the ability to restrain themselves, running amok. If they can be said to be “secure in the saddle,” and “holding the reins of power,” it’s only because they’re riding a man-eating steed, not a noble pathfinder.

It’s worth noting a similarity between Diomedes and Procrustes, who you may recall opened his doors to visitors, offering them an iron bed, and then chopping them or stretching them to fit it. Both myths begin with a seemingly innocent invitation, followed by an unanticipated, heartless mangling. They hint at an awareness of how the mind processes new input, by matching it with previously existing memories, and then trimming the new to fit the pre-existing parameters. In the process a vibrant reality is converted to a lifeless vestige. Diomedes teaches the power-drunk aspect, and Procrustes demonstrates the ordinary individual’s impediment.

Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati describes this principle in his Brihadaranyaka Upanishad commentary:

Generally, when we apply a concept to a percept, we follow the easy path of choosing whatever prejudicial meaning comes to mind. Only after a few instances of finding ourselves in a similar context do we realize that the concepts we have already formed are wrong because of prejudicial associations implied in the meanings we have given to the words. This leads us to a critical review of our preformed concepts. They can be corrected only by our associating ourselves with scientifically conceived concepts, properly worded and explained either by knowledgeable people or documents of authority. (Vol II. 51-2)

A well-lived life compensates for the fallback tendency to amplify our prejudices, by insisting instead on a fresh perspective at all times. This includes being well aware of the hazards of letting the ego run free in a context of psychological antipathy.