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# *Alcibiades and the Distorting Mirror of Celebrity*[*]

[*Alcibíades y el espejo distorsionador de la fama*]

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**Abstract**

This article takes its cue from Plutarch's observation that Alcibiades was undone by his exaggerated reputation as surely as he had been raised to such giddy heights by it before. To understand better a figure too often reduced to caricature, in ancient times as in ours, it is vital to remember, as one surveys the many notorious episodes in his life, the intensity with which the eye of the public was forever fixed upon him, and the distorting consequences that such boundless celebrity must have for how someone's actions are perceived, reported, and often enough misconstrued. Bearing the ubiquity of such tendentious influences in mind, the article will show how many of the notorious anecdotes allow for more charitable and less sensationalist interpretation than they have commonly been given—this not by way of lionizing a mischief-maker or contriving apologetics for a scoundrel, but in order to do a little more justice, in a Plutarchian spirit, to a complex life.

**Key-words:** Alcibiades, Celebrity, Scandal, Athens, Democracy.

**Resumen**

Este artículo se inspira en la observación de Plutarco de que Alcibíades fue hundido por su exagerada reputación tal como sin duda fue elevado a vertiginosas alturas antes por la misma. Para entender mejor una figura muy a menudo reducida a una caricatura, tanto en la época antigua como en la nuestra, es vital que recordemos, al examinar los numerosos episodios destacados de su vida, la intensidad con que la mirada del público se fijó para siempre en él, y las consecuencias distorsionadoras que esa fama sin límites debe implicar respecto de cómo se han percibido, contado y a veces bastante malinterpretado los hechos de una persona. Teniendo presente la ubicuidad de influencias tan tendenciosas, el artículo mostrará cuántas de las famosas anécdotas admiten una interpretación más benévola y menos sensacionalista de la que habitualmente se les ha dado—esto no para ensalzar a un enredador o para inventar la defensa de un sinvergüenza, sino con el fin de hacerle un poco más de justicia, según el espíritu de Plutarco, a una vida compleja.

**Palabras clave:** Alcibíades, Fama, Escándalo, Atenas, Democracia.

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As Plutarch pointedly observes in the conclusion of his *Life of Alcibiades*, "If ever a man was ruined by his own exalted reputation, that man was Alcibiades." (*Alc.* 35.2)[1].

The tireless chronicler, contemplator, and comparer of so many famous lives that had been led, and often enough led astray, by the unbounded striving for renown, must harbor a deep ambivalence towards a spur to greatness at once so potent and so treacherous.

Not for Plutarch, to be sure, the narrowing of perspective that had once prompted his countrymen to set up in the forum, as a tribute to the noblest flowers of Greek valor and wisdom, a bronze statue honoring Alcibiades alongside Pythagoras (Plut., *Numa* 8.10). But not for him either the rush into judgment, now on this side now on the other, that has so often resulted, in his time as in ours, from how singular were Alcibiades' gifts of fortune, how glittering his virtues, and how glaring his vices[2]. The *exceeding wantonness and dissipation* of his habits, the *dissoluteness and unscrupulousness* with which he chased the favors of the multitude, do not escape Plutarch's censure[3]; but they

1 Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Plutarch will follow the Loeb translations.

2 To stress the *difficulty* of forming adequate judgments about Alcibiades in view of all the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the descriptions of his life (GRIBBLE 1999: 264, 267–69, 281–82; FORDE 1989: 176–77) seems only reasonable; but to contend that Plutarch means to call into question the very *possibility* of making satisfactory moral judgments in this case (DUFF 1999: 205, 227, 229, 231, 232, 234) looks like a step too far to me. As this essay hopes to demonstrate, Alcibiades was in all likelihood neither as abandoned nor as inconsistent as he may appear in light of the loose talk that surrounded him all his life, and while his actions clearly defied conventional morality on many occasions, that hardly means they "stand outside, and even challenge, *any* moral schema" (*Ibid*. p. 227, italics added, cf. pp. 228, 230–31; see also my footnote below [no. 29] on Alcibiades' individualism). The "twist in the tail" that Duff notices in the series of "snapshots" that he deems so contradictory and enigmatic (*Ibid*. pp. 232–33; cf. GRIBBLE's "apologetic codas," 1999: 267) is precisely the feature for which this essay seeks to give a more satisfactory explanation: not that all is contradiction and uncertainty about them, as Duff argues, but that they need to be understood against the background of the ever-active gossip mill that kept grinding out the wildest insinuations about an object of public fascination, and often with his connivance too (cf. DUFF 2022: 143 for some common ground around the "wild love" and the "fear and loathing" that Alcibiades alternately inspired). What I see, and what I believe (in agreement with PELLING 1988: 262, cf. DUFF 2003: 110) Plutarch saw as well, is a nuanced character that invites different interpretations, but not so paradoxical a personality that his divergent traits could not be brought into any clear and coherent relation with each other.

3 *Comp. Alc. et Cor.* 1:3–4, 2:1, 5:2.

are never allowed to hide from view the other, equally noteworthy and more commendable side of his character.

The parallels that impelled Plutarch to pair Alcibiades with Coriolanus are eye-catching enough: both won their contemporaries' acclaim early and rose to great heights before losing their commands under questionable circumstances; both turned against their cities and wrought a terrible vengeance[4]; both were murdered in exile under inglorious circumstances. But there the similarities end. Alcibiades' consummate talents as a general and the manifest skill and success with which he conducted his city's cause whenever he was allowed to do so, his Roman counterpart fully matched[5]; but the two could hardly have differed more when we consider how ready Alcibiades always was to embrace his city again as soon as the Athenians received him back into their good graces, while Coriolanus's self-willed intransigence and raging resentment left him so implacable that he would not relent no matter how publicly and sweepingly he was vindicated by the Romans[6]. Even when beseeched by the friendliest and contritest embassies imaginable, both secular and religious[7], Coriolanus could not forgive the slights he had suffered, whereas Alcibiades made every effort to *save* the Athenian fleet, before the disaster at Aegospotami, despite having been spurned once again—a deed judged so praiseworthy by Plutarch that he connected it to none less than Aristides[8]. Coriolanus is presented throughout as a soldier's soldier[9] with little talent for the arts of peace and no interest whatever in diplomatic behavior; Alcibiades' craving for recognition, on the other hand, led him to make himself agreeable and "amenable in the extreme"[10], with

4 On the promise to do more harm still when fighting against their cities than when they had fought for them, compare *Alc.* 23:1 and *Cor.* 23:4 (cf. *Comp. Alc. et. Cor*. 1:2).

5 *Comp. Alc. et Cor.* 1:2, 4:1; *Cor*. 29:1.

6 *Comp. Alc. et Cor.* 3:2, 4:5; *Cor*. 21:1.

7 For his first alienation of the public favor and the resulting rejection that he "could not treat with restraint or forbearance," compare *Cor*. 15:1–4. For the two embassies from the Senate and the people, including his own friends and kinsmen, and the implacable bitterness and anger with which he received them, see *Cor*. 30:2–4, 31:4–5; for the remarkable religious embassy, which supposedly assembled the city's entire priestly class, see *Cor*. 31:1–2.

8 *Comp. Alc. et Cor.* 2:4.

9 *Cor*. 15:3–4. Not just a master but a teacher of war, as Plutarch points out (*Cor*. 15:5). On his extraordinary prowess in battle, compare *Cor*. 4:2, 8:3–6, 9:6.

10 Compare Duff 1999: 215. I would not reduce his adaptability to mere flattery, as does Gribble (1999: 274), but insist on an element of real generosity, though flowing more from

a ready wit and irresistible charm that marked nearly the opposite extreme from the "utterly ungraceful" demeanor that Coriolanus brought to practically all his interactions (save those with his mother)[11]. The specious similarities, then, pale beside the far deeper contrasts[12].

What characterized Alcibiades' life perhaps more than anything else was how his insatiable hunger for fame interacted with the propensity of others, admirers and detractors alike, to form the most fantastical notions of the wonders and abominations that he was supposedly capable of. Whether lifted to the meridian splendor of his most prosperous days or cast down to ignominy, always his portrait was painted in such garish hues that there is surely cause for wondering whether he was really ever seen in his true colors at all. Beguiler or statesman, one thing is certain about Alcibiades: his great wealth, lofty social position, and legendary looks set him conspicuously apart, and made him forever a magnet not only for his contemporaries' disinterested but also for their most obsessive attentions[13]. Add to the mix his unabashed sexual escapades and the spectacle he liked to make of himself on practically all occasions—his luxuriant tresses and trailing robes, down to the extravagance of his very shoes[14]—and we have before us an unrivaled darling of the public eye, now its hero, now its nemesis, now dexterous player, now desperate plaything[15].

Alcibiades' sense of his own greatness than from compassion. Magnanimity is no humble virtue, nor a reliably charitable one, but it can still benefit others very considerably.

11 *Comp. Alc. et Cor.* 1.3, 5.1–2; *Cor*. 1.3, 4.3–4. For the stern warrior's uncharacteristic softening when he sees his mother, though he expects her presence to be his death, see *Cor*. 34.2, 36.4. Such was Alcibiades' charm that he could make even his errors appear felicitous, as Plutarch observes (*Comp*. *Alc. et Cor.* 3.2), while Coriolanus's tone was invariably so blunt and insufferably masterful, his temper so obstinate, disdainful, and all-around impolitic that he often gave offense even when he was in the right (*Comp. Alc. et Cor.* 5.1; *Cor.* 1.3, 15.4, 18.3).

12 On the starkness of the intended contrast, see also DUFF 1999: 205.

13 So extraordinary, indeed, did his gifts of fortune appear that it looked to Nepos, for one, as if with Alcibiades nature herself "had tried what she was capable of" (Nep., *Alc.* 7.1–2).

14 On the various aspects of his appearance and typical getup, see *Alc.* 1.3–4, 16.1, 23.3; Ath., XII 47; Xen., *Mem.* 1.2.24. So remarkable were his looks thought to be that from his childhood on artists used him as a model for their statues (HERTZBERG 1853: 360, with references).

15 I largely agree with RHODES's characterization of Alcibiades as a "playboy" (as per the catchy new subtitle to his 2011 book), although the sensualist side of things did not obtrude itself very much on my attention when I read the work in its earlier incarnation. Alcibiades' *seductiveness* is stressed, rightly I think, by HATZFELD (1951: X, 354) and ROMILLY (1995: 3, 8). HERTZBERG speaks of "all the whims and wiles of a *coquette*" (1853: 24).

Given the alternating currents of admiration and envy, resentment and reproach, but above all prurient interest forever swirling around Alcibiades, how could we expect anything said of him to escape the force-field of distortion that his celebrity was forever erecting around his person? In our own day, we would understand that rumors and gossip about prominent figures must be treated with caution and heavily discounted in most cases. When it comes to Alcibiades, however, all such precautionary principles have been too often cast aside, and even today efforts at moderating the probable exaggerations and putting things into a more sober perspective are liable to be dismissed as mere apologetics for a scoundrel. This article, far from wishing to glamorize a mischief-maker or excuse the wrong he did, would merely have us understand him better, by showing what ample room the wild tales about his life leave for more benign interpretations, even if we can hardly be sure, at such a distance, what did and did not in fact happen.

## 1. *Youthful Scenes*

Consider a prominent anecdote about young Alcibiades that has often been found particularly telling: when he was once facing defeat in a wrestling match, he chose to bite his opponent rather than to concede (*Alc.* 2.2)[16]. The merits of the case were clear to everyone, and the other boy promptly accused Alcibiades of acting like a girl, a charge to which no one of Alcibiades' stamp could have meekly submitted. His answer, that his bite was not girlish but lion-like, would not have deceived anyone, surely; but it did at least have the merit of being witty and *à propos* enough that it was thought worthy of an anonymous Spartan in Plutarch's collection of sayings[17].

A second story recounted by Plutarch has often been taken as the height of that "insolence" which so preoccupies some observers that Jacqueline de Romilly manages to repeat it over twenty times in her book[18]. But if Alcibiades so often gave offense by not acting as others expected, we should not forget to ask,

16 Duff intimates that the anecdote has a sexual subtext—in part because wrestling grounds were well-known locations for men to pick up youths—but that seems a rather strained construction to put on the scene (1999: 231; 2003: 96–97; 2005: 159–160; 2011: 36). Clearly the way he bit his adversary was not playful and sexual, but combative, and even though wrestling may suggest itself as one metaphor for sex, Alcibiades' life was so rich in overtly erotic moments that there is little justification for multiplying them needlessly.

17 Cf. Plut., *Apoph. Lac.*, anonymous ap. 44 (*Moralia* 234E).

18 Eight of those times in only ten pages (Romilly 1995: 14–23); she even speaks of "*brilliant* insolence" (p. 92)! Alcibiades himself believed that "the insolence of prosperity" is nothing for others to complain about because it is simply the reverse side of those misfortunes that we have "all to ourselves" when our affairs miscarry (Thuc., VI 16.4).

before we join the cries of outrage, whether their expectations were really so much more worthy of respect than his refusal to abide by them. It will often turn out, as in this case, that he was not being merely contrarian, but that there was no less method to his madness than to the supposed sanity of his neighbors—in this case represented by a "boorish fellow," as Plutarch introduces him so poignantly, who is unwilling to halt his heavy-laden oxcart for a mere children's game of knucklebones played in the street (*Alc.* 2.2–3).

Instead of dismissing Alcibiades' bold decision to defy the ruffian who paid the children no heed—by throwing himself headlong before the cart—as the pathological intransigence of a juvenile delinquent in training, we would do more justice to the story if we saw it as a rare and remarkable vindication of the children's cause against high-handed treatment by an oblivious adult. What young Alcibiades demonstrated with his extreme intransigence, every child knows, but many adults had forgotten before Adler and others recalled it to their minds over the course of the past century: namely that the games of children are, from a psychological and developmental point of view, every bit as serious and significant as any adult business, and that children have a very keen sense of honor that is easily and gravely offended by casual adult contumely.

Whatever we may wish to subtract for Alcibiades' orneriness, he proved himself exceptionally shrewd in this instance, for he understood intuitively what some of us only learned from reading Tom Schelling's *Arms and Influence*, namely that one need not always be stronger to prevail in a conflict; all one needs to do is to make the victory too costly for the other side, which can be done as well by threatening harm to oneself as to the other[19]. In sum it was not Alcibiades who was being arrogant so much as the sneering adult, and though we take the latter's haughtiness for granted, we would with more reason rejoice that for once the bully met his match and reserve our criticism to scenes where Alcibiades did the bullying.

Even when we watch the young Alcibiades slapping a tutor for not having a copy of Homer (*Alc.* 7.1), there is something to be said on the boy's behalf, for "Homer" in this case did not just

[19] An early pointer, perhaps, to the talent for strategy over brute force that he would develop as an adult (cf. FORDE 1989: 186, 188, 189–190, 193–194, 198, 203). I quite agree, then, that the cart episode offers a signal glimpse of "the essence of the man," as DUFF contends (2003: 113); but this would be far less so if Duff were right that Alcibiades threw himself into the street in a mere gamble with his life, as if he himself were no more than a handful of knucklebones (*Ibid*., pp. 100–101).

represent a single book that someone may or may not have had at his disposal at a given moment, but was shorthand for learning altogether, and for a serious familiarity with the ways of heroes in a self-appointed man of letters whose job it was to guide the future leaders of the city. A teacher without Homer, in this case, meant a teacher without the tools of his trade, an impostor, someone who deserved the knock by any standard but that of convention. Montaigne scoffed at "that madcap Alcibiades" for the cuff, saying that it was "as if someone should find one of our priests without a prayer book"[20]. Indeed. Or rather, without *either* a prayer book *or* a Bible. That Alcibiades was not, in this instance at least, simply going around looking for excuses to push his tutors around is clear from the effusive way in which he praised another one of them who understood his text so well that he was qualified to make emendations.

If the story of the quail that is said to have escaped from Alcibiades' coat demonstrates anything, it is not his unrelenting attitude of defiance, but rather how much even the most innocent gesture or accident would give rise to unceasing gossip (in this case about the lover who supposedly presented him with the bird), simply because we are dealing with someone who had the city's gaze constantly upon him. Had he been less exposed to the eye of the public, and had he not himself sought its attentions so eagerly, would the same stories have been told about him, or what is perhaps even more to the point, would they have been told in the same tendentious way? Early indications of a headstrong and willful character are one thing; the insinuation that here was someone bent from the first on nothing but mischief, blind in his self-indulgence and disregard for others, is quite another.

### 2. *The Dog's Tail and Other Outrages*

When Alcibiades cut the tail off his beautiful dog (*Alc.* 9.1), he got the tongues wagging more furiously than the tail ever had. But once again, we need to be clear on what the story really implies, and what not. There was no question then, as there might be today, of arraigning Alcibiades for his cruelty: dog-owners to this day retain the right to do such things on the grounds of greater beauty or convenience, and in ancient Athens, there would have been no basis for charging a man with violating his own property. The issue was something else, namely that the dog was so conspicuous and precious that cutting off the tail was the approximate equivalent of buying a Ferrari and then polishing it with sandpaper[21].

[20] Montaigne *Essays* 2.36, pp. 691–92.

[21] Comparisons of purchasing power at such historical distances are almost impossible, but at the oft-cited rate of a drachma or so for a day of labor, 70 minas would have meant a

Beneath the "appalling and reprehensible" appearance of the act[22], however, it was a rather shrewd move in public relations for someone around whom derogatory rumors were bound to swirl no matter what. Since people will talk anyway, let them tire themselves out with something that is not in fact too compromising.

It has been alleged that Alcibiades "stole" a chariot from one of his friends. But no, nothing of the sort: the friend wished to get his hands on the thing because he was himself so covetous of an Olympic victory, and he turned to Alcibiades to use his influence, and his money, to procure it for him (*Alc.* 12.2–3). Not that anyone would have trouble seeing why Diomedes took exception to what Alcibiades did instead, namely buy the chariot for himself and enroll it in his own name. A good friend should indeed be glad to put his resources at an intimate's disposal; however, he is under no *obligation* to indulge anyone in this manner, and to ask someone to secure on his resources something for your own benefit, especially if it is in an area in which the other is known to be extremely competitive and covetous himself, has ever been a very dangerous test to which to put a friendship. If the deprived party had to forgo something essential in life—his sustenance, his honor, a great love—one might be more sympathetic. But as, for all we know, Diomedes lost no more than a chance to triumph in an ego contest on his friend's penny, one can understand why the ensuing legal case languished in the courts and did not get heard for twenty years.

A related charge brought by his detractors concerns Alcibiades' use of the city's ceremonial gold and silver plates as though they were his own (*Alc.* 13.2)—"sharp practice" according to some[23]. But apart from the question of whether the story is even true, nobody ever claimed that he tried to appropriate them in any lasting way. It was a grand show of vanity, in other words, not a case of venality. Another story about gold and silver, supposedly illustrating the extraordinary insolence that Alcibiades displayed towards his many admirers, involves a dinner invitation to the house of Anytus, which Alcibiades first declined and then showed up for anyway, drunk and with several friends in tow. When Alcibiades ended the evening by carrying off half the precious cups at the banquet (*Alc.* 4.5), the other guests were indignant; but the key to the story is Anytus himself, who told them to calm down because he would have gladly given Alcibiades the whole lot. Alcibiades was toying with him, no

full *twenty years* of toil, which, converted into the equivalent pay of unskilled labor in an OECD country today, would indeed carry us well into Ferrari territory.

22 ROMILLY 1995: 19.

23 RHODES 2011: 40.

doubt, but he was a perfectly willing party; that is really all there needs to be said[24]—except that Athenaeus adds how Alcibiades seasoned and softened the ill-treatment with much politeness and ordered the cups taken away not for his own benefit but for that of Thrasyllus, a poor friend who happened to be dining at the rich man's house that night[25].

Meanwhile the story told of another of his admirers, a metic all the more eager to impress on account of his inferior social status who gave Alcibiades everything he had, shows us how ready Alcibiades was to be magnanimous towards those who went out of their way to demonstrate their affections, and even to recompense them in a princely manner (*Alc.* 5.1–3). If the metic made an unearned fortune, at Alcibiades' behest and at the expense of the tax-farmers, we need not feel too bad for the latter; they were not a class known for their kindness towards the hard-pressed, or for the generosity of their ways more generally. It is true, of course, that Alcibiades was playing at something that is not appreciated by everyone: but such is the game of seduction in its rougher variations[26].

Much darker tales to the effect that Alcibiades erased public charges at will[27], or that he once struck an attendant so fiercely that he killed him, would carry more weight if we had any warrant for them beyond the slanderous malice of orators who freely declared how much they hated Alcibiades and therefore make very dubious witnesses, as Plutarch points out (*Alc.* 3.1). The beating of slaves would have been so commonplace an occurrence at Athens, alas, that nobody would have taken much notice; but what we can say with more assurance is that it was not characteristic of Alcibiades to vent his

24 Duff overlooks completely the coquettish dynamic to the whole scene, and accordingly overstates the outrage, as if there could be any comparison with the invasion of another man's house by a larcenous stranger, or any question of "violent disregard for the dignity" of its inhabitants (2022: 146–47). See also my footnote to the next paragraph.

25 Ath., XII 47 (534e-f), cf. Davidson 1998: 195. Whichever version one considers, "rapacity" is not at issue (as against Verdegem 2010: 419).

26 See footnote above on Alcibiades as a "playboy." Duff, once again, sees only a domineering bully at work (Duff 2022: 150–151), as if it mattered not at all that the smitten metic got to enjoy Alcibiades attentions at least in passing, and that he was considerably enriched for his pains, such as they were. This is hardly the "humiliation" of a lover as commonly understood.

27 Ath., IX 407b-c. For a swift dismissal, see Hatzfeld (1951: 132), who also shows how questionable, upon closer inspection, the oft-voiced claim looks that Alcibiades habitually put himself above the law in major matters (pp. 59–60, 135, 166–67, 192, 356). Even if there were something to the dubious anecdote, it would have been a gesture more mischievous than high-handed, since what can be erased can likewise be reconstructed and rewritten.

rages in such a cowardly manner on the weak and the defenseless[28]. Once again one must wonder whether the unconcern that Alcibiades showed for ordinary social constraints was really quite so blatant and aggressive, and whether he delighted more in shocking his contemporaries, or they more in embellishing tales about him[29].

3. *Hipponicus and Hipparete*

The notoriously unprovoked attack on Hipponicus (*Alc*. 8.1) appears, at first glance, to confirm in the most vivid colors what detractors have always seen in Alcibiades: a frivolous and violent troublemaker utterly devoid of shame or scruples, a veritable maniac of abandoned selfishness. Yet, upon closer examination, even this seemingly unconscionable episode turns out to have a more complicated subtext.

To begin filling in the outline of the story in Plutarch, we might notice, first of all, that even so mercurial a character as Alcibiades would not have randomly punched someone with no intelligible motive at all. That would have been crazy, and he was clearly not a madman. It may have been done on a dare or wager, or perhaps merely to show off and raise a laugh among his friends; but what made Hipponicus such an attractive target, since he was evidently not chosen arbitrarily, but singled out? One possibility would be that as a close associate of Pericles' he may have represented a standing temptation for Alcibiades that survived even his unloved guardian's death[30]; another, that it was *Callias's father* that he hit[31]. But perhaps we can arrive at

28 As against DUFF 2005: 166.

29 Even if he was indeed as free from *conventional* scruples as he is usually made to appear, we may be a little more willing than the ancients to allow that an "individualist *extraordinaire*", as DUFF calls him (1999: 240, cf. p. 228), might very well have a code of right and wrong that raises him above *unscrupulousness* even if his neighbors have trouble seeing it. FORDE's vision of Alcibiades' high conception of honor may be a little over-bold, but it does make much-needed room for the recognition that Alcibiades was guided by "unflagging", "well thought-out", "generous" ideals of his own, even if they were "essentially self-generated" and cannot by any means be called traditional or conventional (1989: 182, 186–187, 198–201, 204–206).

30 Running away from one's guardian's house as a teenager at the risk of public disgrace (*Alc.* 3.1), or telling him that you would have preferred to know him when he was younger and still clever (Xen., *Mem.* 1.2.46), are hardly ways to express affection. On Pericles' poor suitability as any kind of father-figure for Alcibiades, see STUTTARD 2018: 21, 26; RHODES 2011: 23; HATZFELD 1951: 31; KAGAN 1981: 64.

31 DUFF identifies this angle as "what counts" (2022: 157), but without making the most of it by connecting it to the dare dimension. What if Callias, as one of Alcibiades' boon-companions and friendly rivals, had issued what to him would have seemed the ultimate challenge: "You

a less tentative answer by asking what would, to a haughty gang of youngish toffs such as Alcibiades' set[32], appear provocative enough to justify such an outrageous assault. Not the ubiquitous poor, surely, nor the petty burghers or the stodgy strata of all times and places, but of course the vulgar rich who give themselves airs about their wealth.

Some accounts have made a "career soldier" of Hipponicus who "rose to great heights in his profession"[33], but to speak of him in these terms is highly misleading in a city where there was no professional military and where the *strategoi* held the highest *electoral* offices, for a single year at a time. Being made "general" in this sense, only once as Hipponicus was, may say something about political support, but it implies very little about military skill or distinction. It has also been stressed that his family played a prominent part in the city's religious ceremonies, but that too cannot be easily disentangled from their wealth and influence. Certainly Hipponicus was a very prominent citizen who must have been exceedingly well-connected; perhaps he was even a competent soldier and pious in his way. Yet at the root of it all, we find not his military or political acumen, but his legendary wealth. And not only that, but his riches had a most distinctive provenance, being rumored to derive, on the one hand, from a number of ignominious ploys by his ancestors[34], and on the other hand, beyond all rumor, from supplying slaves by the thousands to the state-owned silver mines at Laurium[35].

would never dare hit *my father*!" Could Alcibiades have resisted such a taunt, whatever it might cost him? For all his social prominence, he was simply not in a position to "assert superiority and humiliate the other," as Duff maintains (*Ibid*., p. 158), not least because all Athens could be expected to side with his elder in this case. Pure contumely was no more his style than completely gratuitous violence, at least not by the interpretation offered here (compare also Forde's argument, correct it seems to me, that Alcibiades did not in fact resort to force very readily: 1989: 186, 188, 189–190, 193–194, 198, 203).

32 Getting a little old for such juvenile antics, certainly, but still in their twenties (cf. Hatzfeld 1951: 23–24).

33 Freeman 1938: 24–25.

34 See Freeman 1938: 21–22, with references, for these ancestral stories.

35 Cf. Nails 2002: 173, and Davidson 1998: 184–85. Xenophon specifies in his *Ways and Means* (4.15) that Hipponicus had six hundred slaves toiling there for him at a time, but the ominous "fill vacancies as they occurred" in the previous sentence should remind us that life in the mines was short in ancient times and that, over the years, the "family business" must have dispatched untold thousands in this manner.

In the event, the brazen blow echoed more loudly than expected, word quickly spread, and the whole city was so abuzz with indignation that for once even Alcibiades realized that he had gone too far. Whether out of honorable contrition and a sincere desire to make amends, or for fear of repercussions whose extent he had not anticipated, he presented himself early in the morning and practically threw himself at Hipponicus's feet, asking to be scourged or chastised in any way the offended elder might see fit[36]. Now Hipponicus could hardly beat such a prominent youth without making himself look base and vindictive, but the situation provided a golden opportunity of a different kind. He had Alcibiades by the neck, and instead of wasting anything on lashes, he could use the attack as leverage for coupling his daughter with Athens' most eligible young blue-blood, thus securing for his grandchildren, at least, the unassailable kind of pedigree that all his money could not buy him outright. It is really only in this light that we can make sense of a grievously wronged man giving the offender not only the hand of his daughter, but also the largest dowry ever recorded at the time[37], especially when he could have been under no illusions about what an unsuitable husband the fellow would make for his decorous daughter.

Hipponicus got his satisfaction, we may presume, and since his grandchildren's accession to the top tiers of the city's social pyramid would have been the main purpose of the transaction, we can also see why he might well have agreed to an extra payment upon Hipparete's giving birth, even if it was an unusual arrangement and an exorbitant sum in the eyes of others[38]. Without such

36 Plutarch points what a talent Alcibiades had for converting mistakes into occasions for charming others (*Comp. Alc. et Cor.* 3.2). In this case, taking off his cloak and offering himself for flogging was surely not a sexual gesture as some have intimated (cf. ELLIS 1989: 33, and DUFF 2022: 159): it was the equivalent of taking off his shirt, not dropping his knickers, and it was calculated both to demonstrate his readiness to make dramatic amends and to display a splendid physique that was obviously too precious for lashes.

37 Thus FREEMAN 1938: 24, and ELLIS 1989: 33, with references. We get an idea of what a dowry of *ten talents* meant at the time if we consider that it took a hundred slaves working themselves to death at the mines for a year to earn Hipponicus *one* talent (Xen., *Ways and Means* 4.15).

38 HARRISON 1968: 50. That such a fortune might indeed have changed hands can be explained by the combination of Alcibiades' reluctance (to get tied down) and Hipponicus's eagerness (to secure the family connection). The lavish supplementary agreement might be taken as an indication that the father-in-law had concerns about Hipparete not getting pregnant, either because Alcibiades might be disinclined to consummate the marriage, or because the bride may have been unusually old by fifth-century Athenian standards (cf. DAVIES 1971: 263; BICKNELL 1982: 248; NAILS 2002: 166).

a stipulation, it is hard to see how even an Alcibiades could have managed to extract the extravagant sum of another ten talents. Nor should we be surprised that Callias would have cried extortion when he was called upon to honor the pledge after his father had died[39]: for Callias was notorious among his contemporaries for burning through a legendary fortune in record time[40]. Not only did he have every reason to fear for the preservation of his ever-waning patrimony, he might also have resented his father's design, which may well have been to direct some money away from his prodigal son and towards the father of his grandchildren, if Alcibiades should prove himself such.

In view of such a decidedly mercenary transaction, even by the not very exacting romantic standards of the day, the poor daughter of an inordinately rich but somewhat déclassé father must have been practical-minded enough to realize that a rogue and rake like Alcibiades could hardly be expected to refrain from consorting with other women. Yet, given the special sensitivity to proprieties that Plutarch attributes to her and that would make perfect sense for a lady in her particular social predicament, we can guess that what must have disturbed and offended Hipparete so much was probably not Alcibiades' womanizing alone, but rather the characteristic indiscretion with which he carried out all his affairs, amorous or otherwise. What he was up to with other women cannot have pleased her, obviously; but what shamed her so much that it drove her out of the house, and eventually before the magistrates to seek a divorce, was his being brazen enough to bring his sundry mistresses *home*[41].

That Alcibiades had a wide libertine streak can hardly be gainsaid, but as before, what we need to keep constantly in view in evaluating the many tales of this kind is how they reflect the prurient interests of the audience as much as those of the lead actor. It was a staple in the ancient literature of this kind to insinuate incestuous relations with mothers and sisters about prominent figures, or to connect one famously licentious character to another not because there was much evidence to substantiate the link, but simply because it seemed too fitting to resist. The colorful tale of Alcibiades' partnership in debauchery with Axiochus at Abydus, for instance, may have some modest basis in fact, but the very architecture of the embellished structure looks so elaborate as to suggest an editing hand far more concerned with

39 Cf. Hatzfeld 1951: 23–24.

40 Whether Callias was quite as prodigal as he has been made to look has been doubted (Freeman 1938: 28–35).

41 Davidson 1998: 99 with references (cf. pp. 103, 113); also Duff 2022: 160.

titillation than truthfulness (Ath., XII 48). The story that Alcibiades set off to Abydos as soon as he came of age to take bedroom lessons from the women there, simply because the place and the man had a like reputation for dissipated ways, is surely best seen in the same dim light[42].

Alcibiades has been taken to task, too, for picking out from among the newly enslaved Melians a mistress who then bore him a son (*Alc.* 16.4–5)—objectionable not because there were any suspicions of unkind or otherwise bad behavior towards her personally, but because Alcibiades was said to have taken a prominent part in inciting the Athenians earlier to their cruel policy. Exactly what role Alcibiades really played, however, is lost to time. There was probably little opposition in any case, and Nicias may have been an even more outspoken supporter[43]; but even if Alcibiades had championed the policy, what should count against him is surely his callous political stance, not his giving a home to one of the few survivors—as if he had argued for the destruction of the Melians only to get his hands on their women! To denounce as "low behavior"[44] the only facet of a wretched episode that contains at least a trace of redemptive potential is a display of cynicism, not moral probity. The outcry at the time, if there really was one, would at any rate have been occasioned less by belated stirrings of humanitarian scruples on the part of the Athenians than by their distaste for the ostentatious brazenness that Alcibiades displayed, as usual, in living openly with a mistress as if she were a regular wife[45].

4. *The Hermae Desecrated, the Mysteries Profaned*

That the violation of the Hermae (*Alc.* 18.3–4) was a grave matter indeed for the Athenians can hardly be doubted. Thus Grote prominently argued that the Athenians' religious sensitivities had been struck in a particularly tender spot:

> If we could imagine the excitement of a Spanish or Italian town, on finding that all the images of the Virgin Mary had been defaced during the same night, we should have a parallel, though a very inadequate parallel, for what was now felt at Athens[46].

No doubt the Athenians identified the sacred statues in question closely with their city and valued greatly the

42 See Antiphon, Fragment 4 (Budé), Ath., 525b. Also BICKNELL 1982: 241, and HATZFELD 1951: 61.

43 Cf. ELLIS 1989: 50, and HATZFELD 1951; 125–126.

44 ROMILLY 1995: 21.

45 Cf. STUTTARD 2018: 136; BENGTSON 1983: 158.

46 KAGAN 1981: 194; GROTE 1850: 230–231.

ubiquitous blessings of Hermes as they went about their various "acts of intercommunion and conjunct life," as Grote put it[47]. We can therefore be sure that they would indeed have taken great umbrage at their stone guardians being so shamelessly defaced and emasculated[48].

Yet the god of thieves and tricksters was no chaste maiden, but a robust traveler who moved with ease and cunning between the worlds, light and dark; his parts could be repaired, and the offense, despite its seriousness, can hardly be compared to defiling the sacrosanct image of an immaculate virgin believed to be the mother of the one true God. Nor was it unheard-of for drunken revels to get out of hand and end with such crude vandalism (Thuc. 6.28.1), or else for the members of the city's fraternities to give each other irrevocable pledges of mutual loyalty by compromising themselves equally in some nefarious act or other[49]. Hence there were always those, from the first, who were inclined to dismiss the whole sordid business as no particularly grave portent, no alarming mark of conspiracy at all, but a sophomoric affair, "one of the common effects of strong wine, when dissolute youth, in mere sport, are carried away into wanton acts" (*Alc.* 18.4)[50]. No doubt the city's nervous temper at the time, on the cusp of so great and risky an enterprise as the expedition, did prompt the citizenry to be more apprehensive than usual about anything that might be construed as ominous, and the mutilations might have looked so to a depressing degree[51]. Never, before such a disgraceful but by no means unprecedented act of sacrilegious hooliganism[52] could be transformed

47 Grote 1850: 228; cf. Gomme et al. 1970: 288, with references.

48 Thuc., VI 27.1; cf. Gomme et al. 1970: 288–289.

49 Cf. Hatzfeld 1951: 164, 185–186; Kagan 1981: 205–206.

50 Cf. Romilly 1995: 71, and Rhodes 2011: 48. The scale of the operation has often been taken to rule out spontaneity (cf. Kagan 1981: 206, and Hatzfeld 1951: 159–160), but the revelers may have been practiced at such things, and their city was very small by our standards. Whether the moonlight alleged by Diocleides would have been more of a help or a hindrance in the operation is a disputed point (cf. Hatzfeld 1951: 159). It still remains quite possible, then, that the whole thing was, after all, "no more than an unusually grandiose and spectacular piece of vandalism of a kind that appeals to some people at a certain stage of inebriation" (Gomme et al. 1970: 286).

51 *Alc.* 18.2–3 and Thuc., VI 27.3; cf. Grote 1850: 232, and Kagan 1981: 193.

52 The claim that such bizarre acts of vandalism might almost be called customary in certain circles of Athenian society will sound less far-fetched when one considers that comparable nighttime disorders are so familiar, even today, in many eminent old university towns that they too might almost be called established traditions (cf. Leão 2012: 185 with

into shock waves that engulfed the city in a fatal panic, the calumny against Alcibiades had first to be worked up from a dubious slander into a frothing frenzy by those who felt so threatened by his rising star that "they no longer observed any measure in compassing his ruin"[53].

And therein lies the crux of the matter: for had his detractors not exasperated the minds of the Athenians with their wickedly insidious machinations[54], the likely innocence of Alcibiades in this case must surely have suggested itself to cooler heads, even at the time, by the simple question of *cui bono*. What could he have possibly gained from sowing evil portents at a time when his power was at a peak?[55] No, the idea that he was responsible could only be made plausible to those who were hostile to Alcibiades for other reasons and inclined to associate him more or less automatically with any mischief that occurred in the city[56]. Let it be said once and for all: neither in Athens nor anywhere else in the world do serious and competent conspirators lay the foundations for a coup by running around in the middle of the night and breaking off phalluses at the entrances to people's houses. And if all that still be found insufficient, Andocides' testimony, while hardly conclusive with respect to his own role, leaves little doubt that while the operation likely originated during a drinking party not unlike those

reference to his own University of Coimbra, though plenty of other locales spring to mind). Whatever one may think of such imbecile antics by matriculated young inebriates, the authorities usually know better than to read too much into them, though the context can make all the difference, as Leão reminds us.

53 GROTE 1850: 233–236, 238, 240–241.

54 Thus GROTE 1850: 291–292, "It is among the darkest chapters of Athenian political history, indicating, on the part of his enemies, a depth of wicked contrivance rarely paralleled in political warfare." Also HERTZBERG 1853: 202, "The unscrupulous wickedness of Alcibiades' enemies by far surpassed any outrage that he had ever been guilty of." HATZFELD too does not hesitate to speak of a "*regime of terror* that weighed upon Athens" (1951: 170, italics added). The role of the fraternities (or *coteries* as he calls them) in fostering such insidious operations is described particularly well by DROYSEN (1836, esp. pp. 39–42), who sees the events in question as constituting a *coup*, though it took several years to carry out (1835: 173, 182, 184).

55 Thus especially HERTZBERG 1853: 170, "Alcibiades would have had to be completely mad, given the bad omens that were already clouding the period before the departure, to add more of his own making, of the most troubling kind, and to his own most decided detriment. A man whose head was filled with ideas of conquering great nations could hardly have had any interest in now organizing a ludicrous campaign against some columns by the side of the street."

56 The "absurd" confusion between the mutilations and the sacrilegious rites sprang entirely from this association, argues HATZFELD (1951: 163–164, 177–178, 181, 189–190, 192–193, 195).

frequented by Alcibiades, the alleged culprit had nothing to do with it[57].

That the connection between the Hermae and the Mysteries had to be engineered and the rumors continually "magnified," as Thucydides puts it, before they could get much traction, emerges clearly enough from our ancient sources[58]. A superstitious fear may have been gaining ground, given what was at stake in the expedition, that impious private antics such as might have been ignored in calmer times, needed to be taken more seriously in this case because they could well jeopardize the goodwill and protection of the gods, or even bring down their wrath upon the city, especially after nerves had already been set on edge by the business of the Hermae. It was such cloudy, atmospheric sentiments, more than any concrete suspicions, combined with diffuse anxieties about the vulnerability of the city's democratic institutions, that set his fellow citizens against Alcibiades, at least for a while. As the hysteria gained more and more momentum and the "waves of unreason swept through the city" with ever more violence[59], the time came when public feeling had turned so much against him, for the moment, that he was blamed for anything and everything that gave anyone alarm (Thuc., VI 61.1–4).

And yet, beyond these diffuse if potent political and religious tremors, there was little solid evidence tying Alcibiades to these scenes, certainly not with respect to the Hermae, and only marginally more so with the Mysteries, "the proofs alleged being the general license of his life and habits" (Thuc., VI 28.2)—which is, strictly speaking, little more than to give the accusations a plausible cast, and thus hardly proof at all. What Alcibiades was really up against, then as now, was primarily the fatal ease with which one can *imagine him* donning the robes of the hierophant and officiating with relish at such impious parodies[60]. Now here one might interject, as Ellis does, that several accusers had attested to Alcibiades' presence at *three of five separate ceremonies* in which the Mysteries had allegedly been profaned[61].

57 Cf. Hatzfeld 1951: 185–186.

58 *Alc.* 19.1–2, 20.3, Thuc., VI 28.2.

59 Stuttard 2018: 160–161.

60 *Alc.* 19.1. Alcibiades was known for drinking his wine undiluted, which not only pointed towards immoderate and disorderly "stampedes to inebriation," but also carried hints of impiety inasmuch as unmixed wine was normally reserved for ritual libations to the gods (Davidson 1998: XVI, 45, 69).

61 Ellis 1989: 58–59. For a scrupulously detailed break-down of the accusations, see Gomme et al. 1970: 271–282. One might be less surprised that Alcibiades was reportedly present three times than at the fact that he was *not* included twice, which might be read to

Where there is so much smoke, must there not be fire somewhere, especially since it is so easy to believe that Alcibiades and his lot would have enjoyed making such displays a regular feature, perhaps even some kind of parlor game or initiation rite, in their meetings?

Before long, accusations were invited and tendered so promiscuously, even against the most upright citizens, that the result no longer had anything to do with judicial proceedings, but degenerated into a witch-hunt that provided an excellent cover for settling old scores or angling for illicit advantages of all kinds[62]. What is more, even if we found the deeply interested reports worth believing despite everything, they can be taken in almost the opposite sense from how they are usually viewed: instead of making Alcibiades stand out as a lone instigator of vice and a uniquely incorrigible provocateur, the very number of allegations makes these ceremonies seem so familiar a sight at the city's more exclusive clubs that the scandal about them begins to look like a pseudo-theological class conflict of sorts—an early instance of the manners of the salon, after many a glass of wine, clashing head-on with the pieties of the masses[63].

Anyone astonished to see the reports of profanations proliferating, almost as if mocking the Mysteries had been the default pastime of the better-placed Athenian gentleman at the time, might recall the wider history of mankind's hunts for so-called witches and heretics, for alleged spreaders of plagues, for deviant and depraved aristocrats, for conspiring subversives or blasphemers or traitors. In this melancholy light, we must form a very diminutive idea of what the ancient Athenian institutions, already so liable to demagogical manipulations at the best of times, could have accomplished by way of separating true guilt from mere malice and baseless insinuation at the height of public hysteria. The suggested parallel, finally, between the ludicrous but lighthearted parodies of Alcibiades and his boon companions, on the one hand, and "the meaning of celebrating a black mass

suggest that these ceremonies were nothing specific to Alcibiades, but a fairly widespread upper-class pastime (cf. KAGAN 1981: 204).

62 Thuc., VI 53.2. Cf. *Alc.* 20.2–21.4; GOMME ET AL. 1970: 282; KAGAN 1981: 202; ROMILLY 1995: 74–78; DAVIDSON 1998: 223, 296–297.

63 As DROYSEN points out, a certain casual disdain for traditional religion was probably considered a mark of sophistication among the younger and more sophisticated set at the time (1835: 180–81). KAGAN too argues that in the world of the Athenian clubs sacrilegious rites were probably commonplace (1981: 205–206, cf. HERTZBERG 1853: 82). Also GOMME ET AL. 1970: 283: "Alcibiades and his friends are not likely to have cherished simple piety; parodies of the Mysteries at a private entertainment could no doubt be exceedingly funny; and no more need be said on the question of whether, or why, the Mysteries were parodied."

in seventeenth-century France,"[64] on the other, can only remind us all the more forcefully of what was altogether absent from the former. Say what one may about the inappropriateness of treating the gods with such levity, the flair for drama that Alcibiades would have brought to his rendition of the hierophant surely had more in common with Monty Python[65] than with the bloody sacrifices, the invocation of demonic powers, and the flirtations with accoutrements of evil that tend to animate the practitioners of blacker and more occult rites[66].

In sum, the whole deplorable business, half tragedy, half farce, was no great credit to anyone, but if it made Alcibiades and his circle look bad, the same and more could be said of his city, which allowed itself to get so embroiled in a delirium of panic and paranoia that it unleashed an orgy of lawlessness beside which Alcibiades' doings in Athens look like playground scenes[67]. Such a state did Athens reach by way of the slanders that played and preyed on the fear of all, the greed of many, and the particular duress of some, that the day came when announcements of meetings of the Council were as much a signal for the citizens to clear out of the Agora in terror as for the councilors to proceed to their gathering (Andoc., *Myst*. 1.36). By the end, the very priests of the city were so intimidated, in the name of setting things right with the gods, that only a single one dared object to cursing Alcibiades on the grounds that her calling was one of offering prayers, not laying curses (*Alc.* 22.4). It was an unflattering chapter, indeed, and one might well come away thinking, with de Romilly, that Alcibiades looked, in the end, less a villain in this case than a tragic figure undone by a reputation, deserved or not, that others could exploit to cause his fall over something of which he was, most probably, in large part innocent[68].

64 Aurenche 1974: 171.

65 Thus Grote's "ludicrous ceremonies for the amusement of a convivial party" (1850: 238, 283).

66 As Leão puts it, the ritual was not inverted (or perverted) so much as made light of, in an inappropriate setting, by unauthorized individuals, and Alcibiades' later restoration of the procession to Eleusis under his own leadership and protection was surely intended to legitimate as much as possible the role of hierophant he had earlier mocked, or more simply, to make a symbolic apology and restitution for his earlier irreverence (2012: 188, 190).

67 Droysen speaks of a "horrendous time" (1835: 206), Hatzfeld of a "lamentable period" during which a veritable "reign of terror" descended upon the city (1951: 170, 175, 191).

68 Cf. Hertzberg 1853: 51, 171, 334, 354; Grote 1850: 284–285; Romilly 1995: 86; Duff 1999: 221; Verdegem 2010: 265, 367, 397–398; Stuttard 2018: 7. Forde alone dissents ("far from a tragic figure," 1989: 210) on the debatable logic that Alcibiades bore his disappointments without anger and took refuge in irony instead.

5. *The Spartan Embassy of 420 BC*

As a prelude to Alcibiades' strange doings as a guest in Sparta, we need to consider his notorious dealings with the Lacedaemonian delegation, which has often been taken as a prime illustration of how "unscrupulous and false" he was in his public acts (*Comp. Alc. et Cor*. 2.1). And indeed, if there were no more to the story than what the ancient sources tell us, it would give us, at last, the kind of shameless betrayal of friends and kinsmen that really cannot be palliated.

Yet Hatzfeld's challenge to the story as it is told in Thucydides and Plutarch still stands after eighty years. Right from the outset, it does not seem very plausible that the Spartans would have entrusted themselves so readily to someone whom, barely eighteen months earlier, they had judged to be of insignificant stature besides Nicias (and whom they must therefore have suspected of holding a grudge for having been spurned, what with his family ties to Sparta and his efforts on behalf of the captives from Pylos)[69]. If Alcibiades had, in the meantime, risen to more prominence, it was by his vocal opposition to the peace and his practical efforts *against* the Lacedaemonians. Is it conceivable, nonetheless, that he could have won the nearly blind confidence of three seasoned diplomats cognizant of his grievances and his current stance—even if he did give them the most solemn personal assurances, possibly to the point of swearing false oaths[70], and urging to the utmost those ties of kinship and amity that were apparent even in a family name that he shared with one of the ambassadors (Thuc., VIII 6.3)?

Perhaps one can indeed imagine Alcibiades doing such a thing, and that is why the story has so often been believed. If he had really proceeded in this manner, however, he would have gone much further than the doleful but ubiquitous maxim that enemies may deceive each other in times of war, and well beyond the generous allowances that Lacedaemonian mores made for such ruses. The Spartans did not usually hold it against those who beat them at the wiles of war if they put their own cities first where it was a matter of life and death[71]. Yet to betray personal trust as egregiously as Alcibiades is said to have done, by

69 Thuc., V 43.2–3, VI 89.2–3, cf. *Alc.* 14.1–2.

70 Cf. Thuc., V 42.2, Plut., *Alc.* 14.7–8 and *Nic.* 10.4. Even if there was no formal oath, it is odd to dismiss the element of "extra solemnity" as if it did not matter when it comes to personal relations (cf. GOMME ET AL. 1970: 51).

71 When Anaxilaus the Byzantian was prosecuted at Sparta for treachery, for example, he successfully defended himself before his accusers on the grounds that Sparta had not been in peril, but rather his own city, to which he owed his first and foremost allegiance (*Alc.* 31.5–6).

first invoking solemn ties and then disregarding them altogether, is surely a darker matter altogether. Had he really acted so unconscionably, he could never have regained the trust he had violated, nor been received at Sparta with anything but loathing and contempt. His friendship with Endius, at the very least, could not possibly have survived the breach[72].

The root of the matter is to be found elsewhere, as Hatzfeld showed so convincingly, namely in that the Spartans were not willing—and possibly not able, given their precarious alliances at the time—to fulfill even their existing treaty obligations properly, let alone to cede any further ground[73]. To put it plainly, the embassy had nothing to offer the Athenians and behind the charade of their ambassadors' "full powers" was nothing more than hot air[74]. The idea that the Spartan delegates came with empty hands has sometimes been taken to suggest that they might have been led to entrust themselves all the more blindly to Alcibiades, for no better reason than that they wanted so badly to believe in what he was supposedly offering them, a way out of a hopeless bargaining position[75]. But this interpretation, though it points in the right direction at least, would attribute to a people of hardened warriors, notoriously "realist" in their dealings to the point of cynicism and hypocrisy, a naïveté that is not at all easy to credit. It is no small matter for men of honor to put their reputations on the line so carelessly by lying, without definite securities, to the representative bodies of a community with which they had friendly personal relations, or so we are told (Thuc., V 44.3), and with which their city was still, however tenuously, at peace. Even if it were certain that the emissaries had, indeed, nothing more to offer than "lame excuses and promises of goodwill in the future," the double shame of not only being so publicly duped (*disgraced*, as Thucydides writes for a reason) but being fooled by a greenhorn of barely thirty, whom their city had earlier spurned in favor of Nicias, would not be quickly forgotten by anyone, let alone the pretended plenipotentiaries of a notoriously proud and prickly people[76].

If there was more to the story than Alcibiades exposing the bad faith of the Spartans[77], it was probably some kind of behind-the-scenes collusion between

72 Cf. Hatzfeld 1951: 89–90, and Kebric 1976: 250.

73 Cf. Hatzfeld 1951: 83, "We see Sparta unable—from weakness or from calculation, we cannot be sure—to get her allies or her own authorities to carry out the engagements to which she had put her name, and this created an incoherent and unstable situation".

74 Hatzfeld 1951: 91–93.

75 Cf. Romilly 1995: 45; Rhodes 2011: 45; Ellis 1989: 39.

76 Thuc., V 45.3; cf. Kagan 1981: 68–69, and Hatzfeld 1951: 89.

77 Cf. Hatzfeld 1951: 93.

him and Endius, an act of public theater staged by the respective war-parties[78]—who both got what they wanted out of the event and may have quietly cooperated to that end through our two protagonists[79]. Just because the ephors found it expedient to send out ambassadors chosen for their appeal to the Athenians does not mean that the key players had any real expectations of, or proposals for, a serious settlement; all it means is that they wished, for the time being, to give the impression that they had such intentions[80]. What is more, an ostentatious "betrayal" by Alcibiades might have been as useful at Sparta as it was at Athens for showcasing the inveterate duplicity and untrustworthiness of the other side. If we may assume that Endius was of the Spartan war-party, well-connected and politically active, then the rationale behind such a contrivance would be as easily explained as the continuing friendship between the two, while Thucydides may have either been taken in by the public show or perhaps been seduced by the attractions of a story that appeared to illustrate so vividly the supposed character of Alcibiades as it had been endlessly exaggerated by excessive publicity[81].

### 6. *Mischief in Sparta*

Under ordinary circumstances and in dealing with a less unusual individual, one would expect a man who turns his back on his city or country and makes common cause with her bitterest enemies in a major war to be eyed with deep suspicion and distaste, even abhorrence, by his old compatriots and his new associates alike. Yet we find Alcibiades not only being welcomed in Sparta with open arms, so far as we know, but making himself popular among his hosts almost immediately, though doubts are in order as to how robust his support there would have really been[82].

Then again the circumstances were hardly *ordinary*: think what one may of a citizen's obligations to the state, when someone has been sentenced to death on questionable charges and with tainted evidence, when his property

78 At Athens, Alcibiades' leading position with the war-faction is obvious (Thuc., V 43.1–2). That there were such divisions in Sparta too is likewise visible in Thucydides' narrative, though more obscurely (V 36.1, 46.4). Cf. HATZFELD 1951: 91; KAGAN 1981: 66; ELLIS 1989: 40; GOMME ET AL. 1970: 52.

79 Cf. KEBRIC 1976: 249–251.

80 See Thuc., V 35.4, V 42.2, V 46.4–5, and HATZFELD 1951: 91, 93, 95, on the disillusioning fate of the Athenian counter-embassy.

81 Thus GOMME ET AL. 1970: 53.

82 Thucydides suggests that he was nervous and feeling defensive at Sparta (VI 88.9, 89–92), Plutarch that he was "misused rather than used" there (*Comp. Alc. et Cor.* 2.7).

has been confiscated and he has been publicly cursed in the temples, then his obligations may be thought to lapse along with his rights, and he recovers his precarious natural freedom to prove himself "still very much alive" by any means within his reach[83]. Hobbes did not invent that turn of thought so much as he articulated and conceptualized it with particular ingenuity (inspired, not least, by pondering the many twists and turns of the Peloponnesian War), and it is as odd as it is commonplace to locate "the central issue in Alcibiades' moral life" where nothing less than his survival was at stake and one might expect condemnation to be muted accordingly[84].

Not that it is easy to believe that Alcibiades would have been so oblivious as to think that he would be doing himself any favors, at Sparta of all places, with a display of rhetorical skulduggery such as Thucydides attributes to him (Thuc., VI 89–92). Such sophistries the Spartans were trained all their lives to detect, deride, and despise, and if Alcibiades had been allowed to give an introductory speech, he must have understood the need to stay "in character" with the Laconian part he had chosen for himself, not to begin by casting himself as the victim of mere prejudice and protesting that his hosts were "unfairly angry" with him and that they had "no right to complain" of his past behavior because they had slighted him first[85]. But we are dealing with no ordinary man, after all, and we might marvel, yet again, at just how outstanding his charm, his skill, and his adaptability must have been if they allowed him, in such a short time and against the background of his tainted reputation, to appear to the Spartans as if he were one of them (*Alc.* 23.3). Such was his ease with assimilating and adapting himself to the pursuits and lives of others that his powers exceeded those of the chameleon, as Plutarch thought[86].

Very well, then, one might rejoin, but how did he repay the Spartans? Was it not by the starkest violation of their

83 *Alc*. 22.2, Thuc., VI 92.

84 Cf. Verdegem 2010: 262 n. 140, with references. "What else could he have done?" asks Bengtson (1983: 172, cf. p. 181). One could answer that he did a lot more at Sparta than his survival required; but that lack of restraint defined Alcibiades, and we might notice that his strategy of repeatedly throwing his full weight from one side to the other was surprisingly successful (cf. Ellis 1989: 65, "There were other ways he might have saved his life, but he wanted more than that, … and his strategy worked.").

85 Thuc., VI 89.1–3 (412); cf. *Alc.* 14.1–2.

86 *Alc*. 23.4. It was said of him that wherever he went, he outdid the locals (*Alc.* 23.3, Ath., XII 47 [534c], Nep., *Alc.* 7.11).

generous hospitality: did he not seduce the wife of King Agis himself, and this practically as soon as he had begun to establish himself in Sparta? For it is an important part of the story as related by Plutarch that "he had not been long in the city" before salacious rumors began circulating[87]. We can hardly doubt that such eager gossip would indeed have sprung up very quickly—not just in Sparta but anywhere Alcibiades went—simply because his reputation for licentiousness would have preceded him everywhere, all the way to the grave[88]. What is more remarkable and surprising is how readily this scurrilous tale has been believed even by the most respectable commentators[89], despite the obvious and serious difficulties not only in the texts, but in the very logic of the situation. It is this episode that stands at the pinnacle of the deplorably widespread *modus operandi* whereby no act of folly is too ill-considered and no shameless deed too egregious to be denied its place among the slanders laid at the doorstep of the Athenian bad boy's bedroom.

As has long been recognized, Plutarch's account of the affair unites two currents in the sources that are problematic even on their own, and that become all the more questionable in conjunction. The one tradition, going back to the *Hellenica* (3.3.1–2), alleges an act of adultery on Timaea's part that would cast doubt on the legitimacy of Leotychidas, but it has to be read against the cautionary reflection that Xenophon was a personal friend and partisan of Agesilaus, whose claim to the throne depended on the credibility of such allegations[90]. (Nor does Alcibiades even make an appearance in this version of the story[91].) The other strand comes from the comedians and the notoriously sensationalist Duris of Samos[92], both far less concerned with the truth of the matter than with telling as riotous a tale as possible. In these latter versions, the very presence of Alcibiades in Sparta at the time was reason enough to weave him into an

87 Plut., *Alc*. 23.7–8 and *Ages*. 3.1–2.

88 Even accounts of his death were tainted by such rumors, which are given, literally, the last word in Plutarch's account (*Alc.* 39.5). There as elsewhere, a sober view of the probabilities points in less sensationalist and more political directions (cf. PERRIN 1906: 25–26). For giving Alcibiades a death to match his life, the prize must surely go to Stuttard's "soft sighing of air" as Alcibiades "ran into the night, and ran, and kept on running while he could, until the night engulfed him" (STUTTARD 2018: 297).

89 From Busolt to Meyer, from Kagan to Cartledge, nary a dissenting voice.

90 LITTMAN emphasizes this angle and speaks of "nothing but propaganda" (1969: 274).

91 Had Xenophon entertained the least suspicion of such a connection, it would have served his interests admirably to spell it out (cf. LURIA 1927: 408).

92 Cf. LITTMAN 1970: 276, and LURIA 1927: 406–407.

adulterous plot, especially since the bad blood between him and King Agis was well-documented. Yet, if we consider how precarious Alcibiades' position at Sparta must have been, it is hard to believe that even the most ornery and reckless character would have taken such a foolhardy risk[93].

Hatzfeld, who is otherwise so careful about scrutinizing and sifting the evidence against Alcibiades, in this case accepts the "grave affair" without question and speaks of the "intolerable dishonor" done the Spartan king as if it were an established fact, with little more than a passing sneer in the direction of Luria's and Westlake's arguments[94]. Yet his own interpretation of Alcibiades' character should have given him pause before so readily crediting the tale—since the impression his great work gives of the man is that of a thoroughly strategic temperament with a general reluctance to risk overmuch, let alone everything, on desperate throws of the dice. Indeed Hatzfeld takes him severely to task for not wagering all more boldly in the early days of the Sicilian campaign, for example, and interprets his hesitation as a failure of nerve or a judgment clouded by the dangers hanging over his head from the agitation against him at Athens at the time[95].

Thinking back upon other widely criticized episodes in which Alcibiades is said to have acted with the grossest arrogance, such as his campaign for unprecedented Olympic glory for example, one might be reminded that he did *not* always behave as one would expect of a man given to hubris—who would have been content to field a team or two in the unshakable conviction that they would come through for him. Instead, what Alcibiades did was to leave as little to chance as possible by sending an unprecedented seven chariots into the race (*Alc*. 11.1), surely not because he was so boundlessly greedy as to covet *all* the top prizes for himself alone, but because he wanted to ensure that the *first* place would be his come what may, precisely because he was not so complacent as to assume that it would be his as a matter of course. But against the allurements of who he was taken to be, often verging on caricature, such nuances never stood much of a chance.

## 7. *Conclusion*

While those who see something to praise in Alcibiades have unusually done so only with major reservations and qualifications, his detractors have not always been so circumspect, especially

93 I agree with Gygax 2006: 485 that the sophisticated sport of spotting fictitious elements everywhere in ancient historiography entails dangers of its own; but in this case, not only the textual but also the circumstantial evidence looks overwhelming to me.

94 Hatzfeld 1951: 217–218.

95 Hatzfeld 1951: 199–200.

in more recent times, and the tendency has been to get preoccupied with the insufferable side of his personality to the point of letting it overshadow everything else. So distasteful do many commentators find Alcibiades that what they grant with one hand, they hastily retract with the other, lest anything of worth be left standing in his favor[96].

Common as it may be to treat Alcibiades' signature venture, the Sicilian expedition, as if it had been destined to fail from the first, to do so is to substitute hindsight for a fair assessment of the prospects at the time[97]. We have no way of knowing how things would have turned out if the Athenians had not managed things in the worst possible manner, by first authorizing a campaign that was predicated on taking the initiative and acting with as much resolve and dispatch as possible; then ignoring and indeed undermining its very rationale by balking at the risks and pairing Alcibiades' daring decisiveness with the wary reserve of a colleague who had never believed in the campaign in the first place and possessed the worst possible temperament for bringing it off (*Alc.* 18.1); and finally not only depriving Alcibiades of his command altogether, but practically forcing their most capable general to throw his full weight into the scales on the other side. Where so much is done to compromise, nay to vitiate, the logic of an undertaking and deprive it of the kind of leadership that it clearly requires, for better or for worse, there its failure can hardly be blamed on the one who originally devised it along the opposite lines—never mind that even so, the Athenians came close to taking Syracuse and that along with it Sicily and much of Italy might well have fallen despite everything[98].

Alcibiades was more than witty, eloquent, and charismatic; his real strategic savvy and sharp political instincts too, though hardly faultless, compare favorably with what has come down to us about

96 Bengtson's chapter is a case in point: "There is truly nothing to be salvaged about Alcibiades, and his file can be closed for good" (BENGTSON 1983: 182), he concludes at the end of an account in which such salvageables keep nonetheless obtruding themselves with conspicuous tenacity. While repeatedly acknowledging Alcibiades' irreplaceable qualities (pp. 147, 148, 169, 178, 180), Bengtson still insists on seeing no more than a "bane" for Athens and one of its chief "gravediggers" (pp. 174, 175, 181–182).

97 See especially MCGREGOR 1965: 33. If the Athenians had not made such monumental mistakes, Alcibiades' plans could have worked out, at least so far as Sicily is concerned, cf. HATZFELD 1951: 144–145 ("certainly realizable"), and ELLIS 1989: 64. If he had succeeded at Syracuse, ROMILLY is surely right to say that we would see him in a very different light (1995: 69).

98 Thuc., VI 91.3, VI 103.3–4, VII 2.1; cf. HATZFELD 1951: 212.

his rivals and competitors[99]. If there were a good way to plot his proximity to or distance from power against the course of events for Athens, who could doubt that we would see so striking a correlation that our regression-hungry age would, in any other context, jump at the chance to impute causation?[100] The question, then, as Alcibiades put it himself, is "whether anyone manages public affairs better than I do"[101]. And to this it would be hard to avoid the answer Thucydides gave, however reluctantly: dislike, disdain, or even despise the man all we want for his personal licentiousness, "in his public life his conduct of the war was as good as could be desired"[102].

It is not to minimize, let alone to excuse or even glamorize Alcibiades' many faults and transgressions if one notices and insists that it was not they that proved his undoing. Instead, whether he was credited with the power to conquer Sicily, to subvert the Athenian democracy, or to decide the sea war in Athens's favor, again and again what did for him was the extraordinary readiness of his contemporaries to form the most exaggerated ideas about what he was capable of. His image invariably appeared to them in the distorting mirror of celebrity that also reflected, then as now, the perennial whimsy of the crowd as it swings forever back and forth between the desire to lift prominent figures to the skies, for a while, and the delight in watching them fall and crash to the ground.

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99 Hatzfeld speaks of the Athenian successes of the years 411–408 ("from Abydos to Byzantium") as unrivaled by any Athenian statesman after Pericles (1951: 353–354).

100 Thus Verdegem, among many others (2010: 417): "Alcibiades' value as a commander appears from the fact that every time he changes sides, there follows a shift in the balance of power between Athens and Sparta." (See also *Comp. Alc. et Cor.* 1.2, and the corresponding passage about Coriolanus at *Cor.* 1.29.)

101 Thuc., VI 16.6. Stuttard points out that his handling of the public purse too, despite the profligacy of his private life, he could be quite astute (2018: 240).

102 Thuc., VI 15.4. There were times when he proved himself "the manifest salvation of the city" (*Alc.* 26.4), others where he might have done so had the Athenians only listened to him, as they eventually came to realize themselves (*Alc.* 32.4–5, 36–37, 38.1–2). The service he did Athens at the critical juncture when the Samian troops were bent upon sailing on their own city in 411, and he prevented them almost single-handedly, could hardly have been greater (Thuc., VIII 86.4). No doubt Alcibiades was still acting in his own interest, not only animated by the city's welfare, but if he had been hungering for revenge, now would have been the perfect time for the decisive blow (cf. Hertzberg 1853: 279, 282).

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