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Against Alcibiades

CAROLINE NEWTON

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MAUD GLEASON
CLASSICS
Against Alcibiades

Context:

In 412 BCE, having already changed his political allegiance twice during the course of the war, Alcibiades allied himself with the powerful Persian satrap Tissaphernes. Alcibiades offered the Persians strategic military counsel to the detriment of Athens and Sparta alike. Thucydides tells us in Book VIII of his History that Alcibiades’ alliance was merely a means to his final end: to be restored to Athens and to seize power from the democrats (47). In early 411 BCE, Alcibiades began negotiations with Athens. In an attempt to regain the favor of the democracy and to sway the Athenian generals, Alcibiades pledged he would bring Persian money and a Persian fleet of 147 triremes upon his return (Thucydides VIII.48).

The dramatic setting of the following speech is a visit by Alcibiades in 411 BCE, prior to the Athenian coup. Outraged by Alcibiades’ reappearance in Athens, and eager to punish his past wrongs, the public calls for a formal hearing to address the proper course of action. The speaker is an imagined statesman, renowned for his loyalty, moderation, military valor and civic excellence. The historical information, found primarily in sections V-XVI, is drawn from Plutarch’s Alcibiades and books VI-VIII of Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War.

The general structure of the speech is as follows,

I-III: An appeal to the audience and the establishment of speaker’s ethos
IV-V: The condemnation of Alcibiades’ character, which is contrasted with the favorable presentation of Pericles and Nicias.
IV-XV: (overlap with previous section) Beginning of a narrative that tells of the offenses Alcibiades commits during the Peloponnesian war, beginning with the Sicilian Expedition. Harsh condemnation of his character is interspersed throughout these sections.
XV: A call for action and the vilification of Alcibiades

*Figures of speech are marked in the footer. In instances where a particular device is employed more than once only the first, or in some cases the most explicit example is noted.
I. Let me begin, citizens of Athens, with an appeal to the gods that on this day I may find myself worthy of the task at hand, and that I may find your hearts roused by the spirit of justice. Never before have I publicly condemned a fellow, or shall I say former, Athenian, but never before has our state fallen victim to such shameless treachery at the hands of one individual. Under these circumstances, I seek to preserve your rights by revealing the extent to which you have been deceived, and the gravity of the threat you now face. It is on your behalf that I bring forth these accusations. Indeed, I was approached, men of Athens, by many of you present today, and other Athenians as well, who exhorted me to come forward and speak out against this despicable defector. Hence, I come before you today not in the interest of personal gain or recognition; rather, I come before you in the interest of the honor and the ascendancy of our country. Indeed, my adversary’s associates have tried me with sums, tried me with threats, tried me with promises – but I have not shirked my duty to you all. But, before proceeding, tradition requires that I make one final request, which I trust would be granted without my bidding, that each of you, inspired by the same loyalty that fills my own heart, will judge by the laws and the values of our forefathers.

II. Alcibiades’ advantages today are many, but I shall only dwell upon two. First, I, as a citizen of Athens, have much more at stake. For if I am to lose your favor, and you choose to acquiesce to his request for restoration to Athens, I shall lose the security of an honorable and just state. If he is to lose your favor, he shall merely receive the just

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1 Anaphora: repetition of “never before” at the beginning of two successive clauses.
2 Anaphora and asyndeton: repetition of “tried” and the omission of conjunctions for rhetorical effect. This combination is employed consistently throughout the speech.
deserts for his actions, and shall be better served in death having received due
punishment. Second among his advantages is his rhetorical excellence, but of this you
need no reminder. Indeed, we find ourselves here today, confronted with crimes that were
facilitated by this very ability to entrance and deceive with sweet-tongued rhetoric. I saw
him this very morning, canvassing before the courthouse, conducting himself with such
audacity, as though we Athenians would be so callow as to give way to his chicanery. I
do not doubt Alcibiades’ intent to persuade and pander you all today; but, men of Athens,
I do not doubt your intent to judge judiciously and in the spirit of the law.

III. To his censorious condemnations of my character, I have an unadorned response.
I have never inhabited any other land but this one, and I have never dwelled amongst
anyone but you. You all, therefore, are my most suitable critics. And if, then, you have
come to know my character to be as Alcibiades alleges, I command you to disregard my
charitable conduct to the state, and to dismiss my words today. But if, on the contrary,
your sound judgment indicates that indeed, my public conduct genuinely reflects my
person, and that this person far exceeds that of Alcibiades’ both in value and in virtue,
then I urge you to deny the credibility of his aspersions.

IV. The licentiousness and acquisitiveness of Alcibiades’ life and habits are certainly
well known to you all. For this reason, I shall resist any general discussion of his
character until we have addressed the more pressing accusations of treachery and

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3 Alliteration
4 In a manner similar to that of Plato’s Socrates, the speaker understates his own
rhetorical skill while magnifying that of his adversary (Apology 1a-b).
5 Anastrophe: inversion of normal word order
sacrilege. It is necessary, men of Athens, and certainly not improper to begin by reminding you of the first formal charges laid against Alcibiades at the time of the fateful Sicilian expedition, and of his role in instigating this calamitous enterprise.\textsuperscript{6} I choose to take-up Alcibiades’ long and checkered past at this point, because upon his involvement in the Sicilian affair, he tasted, for the first time, the power and authority he had always craved. No sooner had his unbridled ambition and insatiable greed been set free than the peril he posed to the state became manifest.

V. Though much time has passed since the famed Assembly, I entreat those of you who were present to recall the vigor and confidence with which Alcibiades spoke, and how he set your hearts aflame with ardor for war and clouded your reason with promises of easy victory. As for those of you who were not in attendance, I shall recount the events that transpired, so that you may have all recourse in your judgments. It was four years ago, during the 17\textsuperscript{th} summer of this protracted war when the Segestan ambassadors arrived in our ports, seeking aid in their struggle against Selinus. As long as Pericles had lived, he advised us, quite rightfully, to avoid unnecessary foreign involvement and the overextension of our resources, but under the influences of Alcibiades and the like, Pericles’ advice and the glory of his age were all but a mere memory. Nicias, Alcibiades, and Lamachus were chosen to lead the expedition, although Nicias had no interest in commanding and defiantly resisted the enterprise as a whole. Five days following the selection of the generals, a debate ensued in the assembly. Nicias stepped forward to voice his opposition and to offer the wisdom of his experience. His words were plain, but

\textsuperscript{6} Litote: the negative statement “(it is) certainly not improper” used to suggest the appropriateness of the action.
sensible. And he spoke not with youthful fervor, but with aged sagacity. He warned of the
general ignorance of the island’s size and of the magnitude of the endeavor. In his words,
our ardor was most untimely and our ambition not easily accomplished. He argued that it
was imprudent to attack Sicily while affairs nearer to home were still precarious. Why,
men of Athens, should we have grasped so foolishly at a new empire before we had
firmly fastened the one we already possessed?

VI. As if his arguments were not yet sufficient, he called our attention to the tenuous
nature of the current peace and the weakened state of the *polis*. Had we not only recently
endured the routs of plague and murderous battles? Was it not only by virtue of our
resilience and strength of character that we were able to emerge, but hardly unscathed?
For these reasons, Nicias urged that we use the respite wisely and guard against those
eager youths, who, never having experienced the anguish of war, were overrun with
zealous ambition for power, fame, glory, and wealth. Was it not most important to
prevent such individuals from pursuing illusions of private grandeur at the expense of the
security of the state? It most certainly was, but we Athenians failed to recognize this
importance, or if we did, it was quickly forgotten under the spell of Alcibiades.

VII. All those present, including myself, were aware of the general distrust with which
Alcibiades was regarded. His ambition and indulgence in all things had provoked
widespread trepidation and marked him as an aspiring tyrant; yet, when he rose to speak,
our suspicions were most foolishly subdued. Now, I do not intend to implicate the

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7 Rhetorical questions are employed throughout the oration to express feigned doubt (aporia). The most notable of the subsequent examples are marked in the text.
majority. For, I can hardly blame those who fell victim to Alcibiades’ pretense; but, having been beguiled once, I implore you, men of Athens, to hold your wits most securely today, and do not succumb to the powers of rhetoric.

VIII. So cunning were his tricks, so persuasive his words, and through a most depraved perversion of the art of oratory, Alcibiades convinced the assembly of his right to command. Nicias’ speech was all but forgotten, his attack rendered impotent by Alcibiades’ guileful manipulation. Alcibiades argued that we were mistaken to deem the ostentation of his private life a threat, but rather, his personal magnificence, he suggested, had contributed to Athens’ international prestige. He claimed his ambition was properly based in excellence, and his arrogance warranted by distinction. Was he not most deserving of credit for the coalition against Lacedaemonia? True, but the assembly would have been well served to remember the dubious dealings that facilitated this success. But we, men of Athens, did not remember; rather, we listened with a gullible ear as he bid us to make use of his youthful zeal, the very zeal Nicias had correctly condemned only moments before. He made grand promises and issued grave threats. He assured us of the victories to be had and the prestige to be won, all at little risk due to our dominance at sea. He argued that to take no action and to enjoy the current respite, as Nicias had advised, would be contrary to Athenian character and would jeopardize the stability of the state. His statement that the health of our state and our empire rested on this expedition was certainly true, but his plans for attaining it casuistic. We, Athenians,

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8 Anaphora and asyndeton: see 2n. Asyndeton is repeatedly employed by our speaker to heighten the dramatic effect of his speech.
9 Aporia and irony
10 Antithesis
were overcome by a false sense of obligation, our hearts inflamed with desire for the enterprise. The old among us were deceived by false logic, believing triumph to be most certain and disaster most unlikely; and the youths were entranced by Alcibiades’ splendor and longed for the mystique of war, assured they would return glorious men.11

Alcibiades’ success demonstrates a mastery of the trade of his beloved Socrates. For no one, men of Athens, has ever made the weaker argument appear the stronger with more calamitous consequences than Alcibiades. His lustful relationship with the notorious sophist is reprehensible, to say the least; but, in accordance with my earlier statement, I shall refrain from loose condemnations of his contemptible character. For even to enumerate his most egregious flaws would demand too much time and attention. So, let us now return to the sequence of events and the details of his crimes.

IX. Of the depraved desecration that followed next, I do not doubt the majority have a sore recollection: in the midst of the preparations for his prized enterprise, the city’s sacred Hermae were mysteriously mutilated. A grave matter this was, indeed, for it was surely an ominous portent for the expedition, and was quite possibly part of a conspiracy to bring about revolution to undermine the democracy. Our inquiry into this sacrilege clearly implicated Alcibiades and revealed his involvement in previous blasphemies. We learned that prior to the episode of the Hermae, Alcibiades had been witnessed leading mock celebrations of Demeter’s venerated Mysteries and engaging in the mutilation of other sacred images. These additional perpetrations confirmed our suspicions of a larger plot. Not surprisingly, Alcibiades defiantly denied the charges in question and demanded

11 Parallel construction
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immediate trial, knowing he stood a greater chance of acquittal while he still had the support of his ardent troops, and before prosecutors had time to gather the abundance of incriminating evidence. But we resisted his request, and knowing his tricks all too well, we postponed the trial until the expedition was well underway.

X. Perhaps, men of Athens, we, too, were at fault. For no sooner had Alcibiades’ flagrancy lifted the veil of passion and enchantment that had clouded our prior judgments than our vision was quickly enshrouded by our narrow determination to requite his wickedness. And our folly did not go unpunished, for by allowing the ships to launch, we condemned ourselves to suffer two most devastating fates – the betrayal of Alcibiades and the utterly ruinous defeat in Sicily.

XI. We had allowed Alcibiades to slip away, and when the evidence had been gathered and the preparations for trial were made, the *Salaminia* was sent to Sicily to recall him and his conspirators to stand trial. But what of the troops? You all know the nature of men - the forcible removal and condemnation of their commander would certainly cause general distress, and worse yet, panic among the troops. So in an attempt to maintain positive morale within the camp, explicit orders were given not to arrest Alcibiades and the others, but to allow them to return with their own ship. Alcibiades and his fellow accused honored the decree and departed accordingly as though to return to Athens. Now, I assure you, men of Athens, any shred of honor or dignity he may have demonstrated in his initial compliance would soon be undermined by his cowardly desertion. Alcibiades’ ship made it as far as Thurii, only to arrive later on the enemy
shores of Laconia. When we learned of his defection, we condemned Alcibiades to death
_in absentia_— a punishment most appropriate for the original charges, and certainly most
necessary in light of his desertion.

XII. Now, Alcibiades was not content to merely seek refuge and respite amongst the
Lacedaemonians. No, his capacity for self-aggrandizement seemed limitless and he soon
became a primary informant to the enemy court. He burned with a desire to patronize the
fatherland that had so questioned his pride and sought to exploit Laconian power to
achieve personal vindication. Quite honestly, I find it difficult to fathom the extent of his
treachery, and his utter shamelessness. He betrayed our plot against Messana. He
betrayed our plan in Camarina. He betrayed Declea. He betrayed our values, our
constitution, our state. He betrayed all of you. And when he faced suspicions amongst
the Spartans, he employed his most seductive speech to secure their confidence, just as he
did ours. He assured his critics that he, too had been wronged by Athens, and therefore
his treachery could not be considered as such. He called our democracy ‘patently absurd’.
He accused Athens of intentions She most certainly did not have. He claimed that we
sought to conquer all of Hellas, beginning with Sicily and Italy, where it would be
possible to amass enough resources and force to annihilate the Peloponnesian states.
Does this accusation not echo Alcibiades’ own proposal to his fellow Athenian generals,
a proposal that we openly deplored? I assure you it does, gentlemen. Indeed, he painted a
vile picture of Athens, one that spurred Laconian hearts to action, but little did they know
that the picture was merely a portrait of Alcibiades himself.

_{12} Anaphora: repetition of “he betrayed” at the beginning of three consecutive sentences.
This technique appears frequently in the speech.
XIII. The Lacedaemonians welcomed his counsel, ignorant of his intransigent self-will. But just as our folly could not be blamed, we cannot find fault with them. For there were great rewards to be reaped if Alcibiades was indeed worth his word. And initially, Alcibiades delivered upon his promise and divulged valuable knowledge of Athens and the Athenian plans. Alcibiades’ betrayal of information brought many triumphs to our enemy’s hands and much devastation to our shores. Confident in his guidance and in their newfound advantage, the Spartans heeded Alcibiades’ advice and made the decisive decision to send support to Sicily while continuing their aggression in Attica. This decision sealed our doom. Spartan aid hoisted the Syracusans to victory, while Spartan aggression devastated our homeland.

XIV. I will now pose a question to all of you: Of the significant events in this war, which has proved to be the greatest of all? I have not a single doubt that the Sicilian affair, as haunting as it may be, lingers amongst your thoughts. For who can protest the momentousness of this event, an occasion most glorious for the conquerors and most calamitous for us, the conquered? We were destroyed. Our fleet, our army, our dignity – all were destroyed. The young and old, alike, all of whom Alcibiades had fooled into believing in the greatness of their cause – destroyed.13 ‘Horrific’, ‘harrowing’, ‘heinous’, whatever words you choose to describe the events in Sicily, ‘great’ must be among them. No one foresaw the outcome. Our defeat was as unpredicted as it was decisive. And who, if any one, merits the credit for this historic achievement? In my opinion, men of Athens,

13 Epistrophe: repetition of “destroyed” at the end of three successive sentences.
it is our very own Alcibiades who deserves double recognition. Has he not earned it? Did he not only instigate the whole affair by prompting the Athenians to enter the conflict, but also determine the outcome by prompting the Spartans to join, as well?

XV. His treachery did not end here, nor will it ever, unless we forcibly put an end to this man’s life. Only death has power enough to quell the menacing passion that rages inside him.\(^{14}\) The Spartans had given Alcibiades the means for vindication, but they had little to offer him by way of power or glory. Thus, content in his achievement and ready to move on, he abandoned Sparta just as he had abandoned us. But where could he turn next? He had exhausted the whole of Hellas in his selfish pursuits and not a single polis had power enough to satiate his desires. So, he turned his attention abroad and without hesitation, he joined forces with Persia, the greatest foe of all. The Greek world has become Alcibiades’ playing board, and we are his pawns.\(^{15}\) He moves to his advantage at the casual expense of the stability of the whole. Thus, he traded Athens for Sparta, and Sparta for Persia as though he owed nothing – no allegiance, no respect, no consideration - to the states’ nor to the individuals who had protected and nourished him. Now he hopes to win back our favor with a pledge of a Persian alliance. While this alliance would certainly be advantageous, can we honestly assume his motivations are grounded in the interests of the parties involved? History assures that we cannot. Rather, he intends to restore relations with Athens so that he might exploit our liberties, overcome our people, and seize supreme power. Do you not find this plan utterly offensive? Has he the license

\(^{14}\) Hyperbolic language used to emphasize Alcibiades’ ardor and ambition.  
\(^{15}\) Metaphor
to believe it so easy to depose of our state and our constitution? Surely he does not, nor shall we grant his assumption any credence by submitting to his request.

XVI. You see, men of Athens, we stand here today confronted with a man still in the prime of youth, whose acts of treachery and irreverence already outnumber those committed by men of legend. We sentenced him to death once before. And rather than preserve the small bit of dignity that remained and accept his punishment, he ran – ran like a coward. Now he returns, having done irreparable harm to the state, to all of you. Has he no shame? Alcibiades has consistently demonstrated a complete disregard for justice. He has no sense of loyalty, no sense of duty, no sense of dignity. To accept his request for restoration would be an abomination. Not only would we be disgracing the laws and the values of our forefathers, but we would also be placing them in grave danger. What value will our laws have, what precedent will we be setting for future generations if we absolve Alcibiades of his sins? We cannot, and we must not allow him to return; rather, we must renew his earlier sentence and condemn him to death. At his hands we incurred vile abuse; now, at ours, may he incur just retribution!

\[16\] Expolitio: the repetition of an idea, with a change in its delivery. The marked question and the preceding sentences convey the idea that if the Athenians allow Alcibiades to return to Athens, they will be undermining Athenian law and establishing a dangerous precedent of leniency towards traitors. To do so would ultimately be injurious to the state and its citizens.
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