The Rise of Alcibiades

Our captain hath in every figure skill

Alcibiades is a puzzling character; the question is whether he is so owing to design or to the unsatisfactory state of the text. Critics frequently think him not fully developed. As H. J. Oliver says, "It would be easy to compile an anthology of contradictory remarks about Alcibiades, and their very number is no doubt some indication that Shakespeare has not made his intention perfectly clear." But we must not take contradictory critical responses to a Shakespearean character as indications that the character is unsatisfactory. Most major and many minor characters are hotly disputed, and puzzlement about a character's actions and motivations may indicate complexity, as is true for Hamlet.

For the second most important character of the play, Alcibiades has a surprisingly low share of words (6.614 percent), which puts him behind Apemantus (9.877 percent) and even the steward (8.553 percent). If a longer version of the play existed at one time, as I suspect, he may have had more than the few lines he speaks in the first two acts and been even more prominent in the ending than he is now. But I do not think that this would have changed the impression of Alcibiades' verbal reticence. He is a man not only of few words but also of short speeches who makes longer speeches only at turning points of his career: the thirteen-line soliloquy when he is exiled, the thirteen-line address to the senators before the gates of Athens, and the fifteen lines that conclude the
play. All these speeches initiate significant action, and even his brief remarks are deliberately and pregnantly phrased. He recalls another man of power, Bolingbroke in *Richard II*, who is verbally reticent and not given to explanations of himself or his actions. In both cases, but more so with Alcibiades, the importance of the man and what he stands for is underlined by nonverbal dramatic means, by significant positioning in scenes, and by military uniform, armor, and martial sounds.

If, in spite of his sufficient prominence, Shakespeare's Alcibiades remains something of a puzzle, I shall argue that this is by design, a design consistent with Plutarch's portrayal of the man. Since Shakespeare took few factual details from "The Life of Alcibiades," critics sometimes claim that he was not influenced by it; Geoffrey Bullough, for instance, says that Shakespeare's focus on Timon made it impossible for him to develop Alcibiades into the "subtle, adaptable and various man of Plutarch." Instead, Bullough says, Shakespeare aimed at making Alcibiades into Timon's foil, a reasonable man who unlike the misanthrope knows how to cope with the world; the play's lack of completion is responsible for this plan not being fully realized. If Bullough were right, Shakespeare would have seen Alcibiades quite differently from Plutarch and from the Renaissance tradition based on Plutarch because the total effect of this portrait was more negative than positive. Plutarch saw Alcibiades sharing the guilt for the Athenian debacle with the oligarchy, the people, and the political circumstances. Although he said much in praise of the general, on balance he judged him to have been a misfortune for Athens. It is symptomatic that he mentioned Timon's interest in Alcibiades as one that someday would do great mischief to the Athenians—a saying that forms the nucleus of Timon's tirades against Alcibiades in the fourth act. The young general, said Plutarch, was handsome, strong, brave, gifted, well-educated, and experienced in martial affairs. Although halting of speech, he was eloquent: he often paused to consider what he would say and brought it forth wittily and with good delivery. He was endowed with ambition and a desire for honor. However, he inclined to dissoluteness, effeminacy of dress, and lavish expenditures. Most of all, he was greatly adaptable—Plutarch compared his changeability to that of the chameleon. His failure to keep promises showed his lack of firm principles.

Plutarch anticipated somewhat the later conception of Alcibiades as a climber on Fortune's wheel, who became the goddess's victim. Alcibiades' successes constantly drew envy. When he returned from exile, the greatest men of the city remained envious; the suspicion that he might make himself king clung to him; even those who welcomed his return were
torn between joy and grief. Whatever feeling of triumph he experienced was undercut by doubt and fear. Outwardly, however, he appeared serene; his speech to the people cleverly put the blame for his tribulations not on the Athenians but on “cursed fortune and some spiteful god that envied his glory and prosperity.” Boccaccio put this fortune theme into the de casibus formula; in the same tradition, Lydgate saw Alcibiades defeated by ambition and “Fortunys fals mutabilitie.”

Renaissance political theorists were more severe with Alcibiades. He was the main culprit of the Athenian defeat by Sparta for Louis Leroy in his commentary on Aristotle’s Politics (translated into English in 1598) and for Jean Bodin in The Six Books of a Commonweal (translated in 1606). According to Bodin, Alcibiades brought about political instability by changing the government into a democracy, which Bodin conceived in Aristotelian terms as the rule of the populace.

Incidentally, somewhere in the background literature Shakespeare would have gathered the idea that Alcibiades had trouble with the Athenian “senate”—Leroy and Lydgate used this romanizing term for the oligarchy, a term that should not surprise us in Timon.

Alcibiades certainly did not have a good press in Shakespeare’s England. A quite negative satirical portrayal of his character was that by Thomas Lodge in Wit’s Misery and the World’s Madness (1596). Shakespeare is likely to have known the book; it carries the famous reference to the Ur-Hamlet. According to Lodge’s curious genealogy, Alcibiades was a descendant of one of Satan’s seven ministers, that is, the deadly sins, specifically the son of Leviathan (Pride). Lodge saw the degradation of his own time evidenced by London’s being replete with vainglorious, boastful, and quarrelsome rakes. These, he said, play gallant courtiers near St. Paul, pride themselves on ancestors, stratagems, and policies, and “sail by the wind of his fortune, become chameleons like Alcibiades, feeding on the vanity of his tongue with the foolish credulity of their ears.” Lodge’s characterization of Alcibiades has some resemblance to that of Alcibiades’ friend in Shakespeare’s play, at least if we take the senators’ word for his quarrelsomeness and riotous living (3.5.68–75). This, of course, is disputable evidence, coming as it does from suspect witnesses; but in any case the senators make good use of the ill reputation of Alcibiades’ followers. It is worth noting that elsewhere, in Catharos: Diogenes in his Singularity (1591), Lodge attacked usury and wished for “some wise wag like Alcibiades to burn usurers’ bonds, bills, and contracts in the market place, which if they were set on fire, the bonfire would be so big, as I fear me would consume the whole city.”

It
seems likely that Shakespeare got the idea of making Alcibiades a fighter against usury, and an unexpected one at that, from Lodge. Plutarch has nothing of the sort.

It would surely have been difficult for Shakespeare to alter the character of Alcibiades essentially from this firmly established unfavorable picture and make him into a morally positive figure to set off Timon's negativism. Any significant cosmetic surgery would have run counter to audience expectation, and the play gives no evidence that Shakespeare undertook it or intended to undertake it. The few lines Alcibiades speaks in the first two acts convey the impression that he must be taken as an important man of questionable character; his intelligence and his courage are not in doubt, but his moral fiber is. The trumpet that announces him and the uniforms and arms he and his followers wear demonstrate his military potential. Yet the one sentence he utters on this occasion has an almost saccharine sweetness: "Sir, you have sav'd my longing, and I feed / Most hungerly on your sight" (251–52). Oliver notes that the expression "to save one's longing" is recorded as meaning to anticipate and so to prevent a woman's longing. Perhaps Shakespeare was aware of Alcibiades' reputed homosexual tendency. If so, he thought of him as bisexual since a page is later shown to carry letters from a courtesan to him as well as to Timon (2.2.86). Unpleasantly, Alcibiades' phrase of feeding hungrily on Timon's sight continues the cannibalistic food imagery with which Apemantus has just refused Timon's invitation to dine with him: "No; I eat not lords" (1.1.204). Further, Apemantus's comment on the mutual greetings of Alcibiades, Timon, and their retinue has a way of associating Alcibiades with Timon's sycophantic friends: "That there should be small love amongst these sweet knaves, / And all this courtesy!" (248–49).

During the banquet, when flattery envelops Timon most odiously, Alcibiades says very little. To Timon's coarse remark "You had rather be at a breakfast of enemies than a dinner of friends" he answers compliantly: "So they were bleeding new, my lord, there's no meat like 'em; I could wish my best friend at such a feast" (1.2.75–79). This argues a streak of cruelty in Alcibiades; unpleasantly, the image continues the meat-blood association by which Apemantus has just characterized Timon's friends as his cannibalistic exploiters: "O you gods! What a number of men eats Timon, and he sees 'em not! It grieves me to see so many dip their meat in one man's blood; and all the madness is, he cheers them up too" (39–42). The same cannibalistic strain sounds again in Apemantus's derisive comment on Alcibiades' boast about feeding on his enemies: "Would all those flatterers were thine
enemies then, that then thou mightst kill ’em—and bid me to ’em” (80—81). Apemantus’s remark seems to indicate that he does not put Alcibiades among Timon’s flatterers, and it is true that, deferential and obliging as the general is, he is not a blatant sycophant. Timon seems to look upon him as special friend since he singles him out as “my Alcibiades” when he decides to go hunting (2.2.18). Yet the relationship is not shown as being a close friendship. If it were, it would interfere with the impression of Timon’s being isolated even in prosperity.

Alcibiades accepts Timon’s gifts and answers the pleasantries with which they are proffered without in return fawning over Timon as do the others. At a later point during the banquet, Timon turns again to Alcibiades, accompanying a gift for him with another allusion to his profession: “Thou art a soldier, therefore seldom rich; / It comes in charity to thee: for all thy living / Is ’mongst the dead, and all the lands thou hast / Lie in a pitch’s field” (221—24). Alcibiades’ reply, “Ay, defil’d land, my lord,” is at least witty synonymy, enough to set him off from the others without making him a moral exemplar. The focus is on his soldiership, which becomes important later. Although quiet, he is quick at repartee and mentally agile. These impressions one gets of the earlier Alcibiades make the subsequent characterization of him as “an ag’d interpreter, though young in days” (5.3.6) believable enough.

Little as the character of Alcibiades is developed in the first two acts, it is sufficient to create expectations. The test of his intellectual and moral caliber comes in his debate with the senators, a debate that vies with that among the Trojan princes in Troilus and Cressida (2.2) for the distinction of being the strangest discussion of justice and honor in Shakespeare’s plays. In both cases, the issues debated are much less important than the attitudes displayed, and the real reason for the contention lies in these attitudes. In Timon, the insubstantiality of the arguments is increased by the triteness of the rhyming couplets bandied about.

The issue is per se problematic; it involves a matter of honor on which Shakespeare’s contemporaries held conflicting opinions: Alcibiades’ friend has killed a man in a duel and, the senator says, must die. The incident and the judgment were common in Shakespeare’s day, but so was the mercy for which Alcibiades pleads. Custom and morality pointed in different directions on the permissibility of dueling. It was a fact of life (and of death) for the aristocracy, and it increased under James; so did the anti-dueling literature. Shakespeare does not provide enough data to judge this particular case, a judgment that would be problematic even then; the focus is
not on the validity of the arguments, but on the ambiguity of Alcibiades' character and the arbitrariness and villainy of the senators. We have no way of knowing whether Alcibiades' friend is really the man of moderation he claims him to be:

And with such sober and unnoted passion
He did behave ["manage"] his anger, ere 'twas spent,
As if he had but prov'd an argument.

(3.5.21-23)

Alcibiades may forge here "too strict a paradox" as the senators say; their description of the duelist as a "sworn riotor" would ring familiarly in the ears of Shakespeare's audience, who had firsthand experience with quarrelsome, debauched soldiers, kept from employment by the long peace. But the senators make their position, whatever its justice, sound specious by the string of conventional paradoxes of a Stoic kind they utter. And they contradict their recipe by their action: instead of wearing insults like their "raiment, carelessly," they banish Alcibiades on the slightest provocation. The general has a point when he protests that in view of his deserts he merits greater consideration.

Whatever the validity of his position, Alcibiades is an excellent debater who recognizes the value of the trumps he holds. He hints at the weakness of the senators, their greed, which he dubs love of "security"; and he knows how to use the commercial metaphors of which they are fond: he will "pawn" his victory and honor to them (81–83). His angry reaction to his banishment shows that he also knows how to attack the senators where they are most vulnerable: "Banish your dotage, banish usury, / That makes the senate ugly!" (99–100). But his espousal of the usury issue at this point smells of opportunism: there is no indication that he has as yet learned of Timon's plight, and he has not said anything about usury until now, when attacking it serves his personal purpose against the unpopular senate.

When alone, Alcibiades shows how he will transform defeat into victory:

Banishment!
It comes not ill. I hate not to be banish'd;
It is a cause worthy my spleen and fury,
That I may strike at Athens. I'll cheer up
My discontented troops, and lay for hearts.
'Tis honour with most lands to be at odds;
Soldiers should brook as little wrongs as gods.

(3.5.112-18)

The light of irony is on the concept of honor here. It is hardly honorable to be at odds "with most lands," and it is certainly not divine to take revenge. Alcibiades' political action aims no more at the welfare of the state than does the senators'.
he betrays no shred of patriotism, no regret at having to wage war against Athens, and his likening of soldiers to gods adds a touch of arrogance. By contrast, the misanthropic Timon sounds almost patriotic when he curses Alcibiades because “by killing of villains / Thou wast born to conquer my country” (4.3.107–8).

Alcibiades’ shrewd Machiavellism, indicated by his intention to “lay for hearts,” proves clearly that, unlike Timon, he knows the realities of the power situation: he must make himself valued again by a display of power, and therefore, as a soldier will say later, the fall of Athens is the mark of his ambition (5.3.10). His military progress is obvious at his next entry when he marches on the stage to the sound of drum and fife. But this is not a moral ascendance. Lechery as well as war holds the fashion with him; he is accompanied by a “brace of harlots” (4.3.81), giving Timon the opportunity of castigating the two most common vices of mankind.

This, the last meeting of Alcibiades and Timon bears looking at closely, since commentators have seen an inconsistency in Alcibiades’ at first seeming to know little or nothing of Timon’s treatment, declaring that he is “unlearn’d and strange” in the misanthrope’s fortunes (57), then admitting “I have heard in some sort of thy miseries” (78), and finally waxing eloquent about these miseries:

I have heard and griev’d
How cursed Athens, mindless of thy worth,
Forgetting thy great deeds, when neighbour states,
But for thy sword and fortune, trod upon them—

(93–96)

The gradualism in this revelation of knowledge surely indicates that Shakespeare wanted it to be understood as Alcibiades’ deliberate strategy rather than that he failed to revise uncertainties in his design. Alcibiades knows more of Timon’s situation than he lets on at first; he would prefer learning of Timon’s grievances from the misanthrope himself in order to make his offer of aid and redress more spontaneous. It is also to Alcibiades’ purpose to recall at this point the Athenians’ ingratitude for Timon’s military deserts. Timon earlier professed to have done the state some service (2.2.201–2); when Alcibiades now adds that he did so with his “sword and fortune,” we are impressed not only by the Athenians’ ingratitude but also by the subtlety of Alcibiades’ appeal to Timon as a comrade-in-arms. The general is obviously not deterred by Timon’s insults and his refusal to accept the gold Alcibiades proffers him; as we learn later, he sends letters to Timon to join in the campaign against Athens, “in part for his [Timon’s] sake mov’d” (5.2.12)
—we know, of course that thoughts of Timon played no role in Alcibiades’ decision. Alcibiades’ strategy of gradual revelation points up his diplomatic prudence, which contrasts with Timon’s vehement but honest misanthropy.

Shakespeare’s characterization of Alcibiades before he becomes master of Athens in the fifth act is thus in the Plutarchian pattern. Alcibiades is indeed subtle, adaptable, and various. He is ingratiating to the point of effeminacy, but his soldiership is never in question. His lax morals are evident when we see him accompanied by prostitutes. He is ambitious, but he does not consume himself with passion; and he is greatly flexible in the pursuit of his goals, as when he does not press his appeal for Timon’s help. He is not a man to give way to boundless anger like Timon—it is as if he were characterizing himself when he describes his comrade who killed an opponent as a man who knows how to control and manage his anger. Shakespeare may have been induced to emphasize the temperamental contrast between Alcibiades and Timon because of a notable distinction Plutarch made in this respect between Alcibiades and Coriolanus: the latter was a man who, “following his choleric mood, would be pleased with nothing,” whereas Alcibiades, when he saw they [his countrymen] repented them of the injury they had done him, came to himself and did withdraw his army.”

This is quite Alcibiades’ procedure at the end of Shakespeare’s play.

When analyzing the ending of the play, the critic is hampered by the unsatisfactory state of the text, which, as I have argued, contains some lacunae here. I doubt that whatever may be missing could have cleared up the ambiguities of Alcibiades’ character and turned the portrait from dubious to positive. Nothing warrants such change. In fact, the original text, rather than making Alcibiades more likable and a viable alternative to Timon, as Bullough thinks, may well have brought the negative aspects of his character into sharper focus. If I may indulge in a speculation about what is missing, a scene of desperate debate in Athens before Alcibiades’ arrival at the gates and a crowd scene after his demand for surrender suggest themselves to me. Both or either of these scenes would have offered an opportunity for the one character to reappear whom I miss in the fifth act, the character who would be a keen critic of Alcibiades’ words and actions: Apemantus. Shakespeare’s other satirical and acerbic commentators, Thersites, Lucio, Parolles, and Menenius, reappear in the fifth acts of their plays for significant comments; the fool in Lear, it is true, does not, but his presence would hardly be compatible with the starkly tragic finale. Although Shadwell’s expansion of
Shakespeare’s Timon cannot generally be commended, I think his feeling was right that Apemantus should have a part in the ending. Shadwell gave Apemantus several speeches, which, though they do not spare the Athenians, primarily chastise Alcibiades for his private revenge, base passion, false sense of honor, dishonesty, folly, and madness. This is neoclassical moralizing; Shakespeare could have done better with a few of Apemantus’s characteristic mutterings.

The final scene is, I think, complete; it is, at any rate, effective. True, it does not vie in spectacle with some of Shakespeare’s greatest finales, such as those of Hamlet and Lear. There is no death, only the report of one, and we have heard it before; instead, there is a reconciliation, one that resembles not so much those of the tragedies as of the problem plays. There is a certain open-endedness here, a lack of total conviction characteristic of the endings of All’s Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure, and particularly Troilus and Cressida. But we have come to look upon open-endedness as rather a virtue, and in Timon it has intriguingly ironic implications.

Alcibiades’ military power is underlined musically, first by trumpets, then by drums. Several trumpets announce his arrival before the walls of Athens in contrast to the one trumpet at the beginning of the play; it was Timon then who had the stronger musical emphasis. We are conscious of the turn of Fortune’s wheel; so are the senators. Alcibiades rises to eloquent accusation; his conceit that contrasts the ease and nonchalancence of the senators’ use of their time with the breathlessness of his own shows him a master of judicial oratory (5.4.3–13). However, the epithets of “lascivious town” and “licentious measure” he has for Athens sound ironic in the mouth of a patron of camp followers. One of the senators, in answer, speaks of Alcibiades’ earlier grief, before he became mighty and they had cause to fear him, as a “mere conceit” (14), that is, an idea not yet transformed into action. But Alcibiades’ grief is a conceit in this sense even now, better in words than in fact; we remember that he felt his exile did not come “ill.” We may note that “conceit” was assuming in Shakespeare’s time its later meaning of deception. Alcibiades’ oratory has a special artifice that draws its sincerity into doubt.

Artifice becomes artificiality in the two senators’ answer. One should hesitate to call set speeches in Shakespeare rehearsed because they are by definition factitious; but here they are so deliberately and carefully phrased and carried forward in the form of a duet as to give the impression of a deliberate and contrived pattern that wraps unpleasant
truths in delicate ambiguities. The second senator's contention that Athens has shown its good faith by wooing not only Alcibiades but also Timon "by humble message and by promis'd means" (20) conveniently omits to mention that the senators solicited Timon for help against the "boar" Alcibiades. It is quite true that in Athens "all have not offended," but to Timon the senators more justly admitted earlier a "forgetfulness too general gross." The senators' plea not to raze the innocent walls of Athens is apt to make one recall Timon's impressive condemnation of these walls for protecting the Athenian wolves. Quite suspect is the senators' poetic explanation of the demise of Alcibiades's enemies "Shame, that they wanted cunning in excess,/ Hath broke their hearts" (28—29)—believe who will this cause of death. Whatever has happened to the guilty senators, cunning is still alive in Athens.

And so is commercial-mindedness. Alcibiades is reminded that efforts were made "to give thy rages balm, / To wipe out our ingratitude, with loves / Above their quantity" (16-18)—moral accountancy at work again! The "decimation and a tithed death" (31) that the senators see as a consequence of Alcibiades' military conquest are estimations of expert tax collectors. It is true that "crimes, like lands, / Are not inherited" (37—38); but this phrase recalls how Timon lost his land, and it evokes Timon's saying of the senators that they have "their ingratitude in them hereditary." Such ironic echoes combine with calculating phrases and half-truths to suggest less than total senatorial repentance. The appeal of the senators to Alcibiades, like their earlier one to Timon, is by "promised means" and "special dignities"; one remembers the "heaps and sums of love and wealth" they dangled before the misanthrope's eyes. Promising will still be more fashionable than performance in Athens.

Alcibiades is notably silent during the rhetorical pyrotechnics. Then he answers nobly and settles with the senate on generous terms. Only his and Timon's enemies, to be selected by the senators themselves, will be punished. Thus Alcibiades again associates his name with Timon's; although the misanthrope refused to become his ally, Alcibiades succeeds in making Timon's cause his own. Apparently, he is aware that he may need whatever material and moral help he can get; his demand to the senators "Descend, and keep your words" (64) indicates his wariness. To those in Shakespeare's audience who remembered the historical Alcibiades' record in promise-breaking, this admonition must have had a certain irony. At any rate, we are again reminded that in Athens promises can be broken and often are.

Considering the senators' evasions and half-truths,
Alcibiades seems too accommodating, too forgiving here, quite like the historical Alcibiades on his last return to Athens. Even if one does not know of the latter’s continued trouble with the Athenians and theirs with him, one is likely to have doubts about the duration of mutual amity. “Be Alcibiades your plague, you his” still rings more loudly in one’s ears than the strains of concord that fail to muffle the subtle dissonances. In this play of relatively few strong stage movements, it is significant that the senators’ descent from above (the playhouse balcony presumably) is the second such descent; the first was that of the usurer Lucullus, who refused to aid Timon. If the second descent recalls the first, it contributes to evoking the dangerous corruption of Athens.

In agreement with his role as the final, even though precarious and questionable, order figure of the play, Alcibiades reads Timon’s epitaph and adds a flowery tribute of his own. There could be no greater contrast in tone and style than that between the rugged fourteeners of Timon’s epitaph with its insulting gesture (“A plague consume you wicked caitiffs left”) and Alcibiades’ soothing, polished lines composed in what we have come to call the metaphysical style:

Though thou abhorr’dst in us our human griefs,
Scorn’dst our brains’ flow and those our droplets which
From niggard nature fall, yet rich conceit
Taught thee to make vast Neptune weep for aye,
On thy low grave, on faults forgiven

(5.4.[5.3.]75-79)

These lines vie with the senators’ defense in ambiguities. Who, after all, wept for Timon the misanthrope? Flavius, of course, did, but his tears are presumably stilled now. And whose are the “faults forgiven”? They are hardly Timon’s, since it was supposedly his conceit to make Neptune weep by erecting his grave at the seaside. Timon never forgave the Athenians, and they, guilty of ingratitude, would forget their own faults if they forgave Timon. The “conceit,” a term associated with Alcibiades, is really his; and its polish should not blind us to the politically advantageous image it creates for him. The extravagant figure makes Alcibiades the universal forgiver and the inheritor of Timon’s legend—quite contrary to the dead man’s wishes. If this is a “rich conceit,” its riches are for the survivors. After Alcibiades’ spider-web-thin eulogy of Timon, his concluding phrase has a quality of perfuntoriness, even of embarrassment: “Dead/Is noble Timon, of whose memory / Hereafter more.”

The ambiguities, ironies, and paradoxes are carried through to the end of the play; in fact, they find here a cul-
mination until the very last line brings a note of certainty, a precise and clear command that evokes the reality of Alcibiades’ present power:

Bring me into your city,
And I will use the olive with my sword,
Make war breed peace, make peace stint war, make each
Prescribe to other, as each other’s leech.
Let our drums strike.

For many modern commentators, Alcibiades’ paradoxes seem to be promising the olives of an endless age. One critic finds him fusing humanistic virtues with chivalric military values to regenerate Athens. For another, “it is as if Shakespeare is now prepared to see goodness in the dominion of a strong man who will exercise his power with benevolence.”

If nothing else, the “leech” metaphor, coming as it does at the end of the long line of unpleasant animal and food images in the play, ought to make us pause; the blood-sucking worms are imagined to be feeding on each other, a reciprocal relationship that evokes Timon’s wish that Alcibiades become the plague of the Athenians, and they his. Even if we stay merely with the medical side of the metaphor, there is no reason to assume that the prescription presages health. Draw who will comfort from the idea that in a body politic peace must follow war, and war peace, just as in a healthy human body there must be a tension and balance of humors.

Certainly not all Shakespeare’s contemporaries drew such comfort. Of course, the dangers of peace, that is, idleness, luxury, and corruption, were often held up as warnings, and Hamlet’s diagnosis of Fortinbras’s martial enterprise (a rather questionable adventure it seems) is in this tradition: “This is th’ imposthume of much wealth and peace / That inward breaks” (4.4.27–28). On the other hand, there were attacks on the old commonplace of war as a healer, Montaigne’s among them.

Sir William Cornwallis too looked skeptically at war as the “medicine for commonwealths, sick of too much ease and tranquility.” Even Barnabe Rich, the old soldier who never ceased to warn of the fatness of these pursy times, took a dim view of those that sought to advance their fortunes by war or the threat of war: “I must confess that these war lovers are like physicians that could wish the city to be full of diseases, whereby they might be employed for their own gain.”

Certainly the quality of the military physician who was to heal the state mattered for Rich. And as to Shakespeare’s attitude, we may remember that Macbeth felt himself a purger of the body politic—hardly a commendation for the commonplace. Also, Coriolanus’s attempt to steel the sinews of Rome is not sympathetically portrayed. He all-too-joyfully
hopes that the Volscian invasion will provide means "to vent / Our musty superfluity" (1.1.225-26). Antony finds Pompey's sedition, nourished by the indolence of peace, a bad remedy: "And quietness, grown sick of rest, would purge / By any desperate change" (1.3.53-54). How fitting a comment on all this is Timon's "trust not the physician; / His antides are poison, and he slays / More than you rob" (4.3.434-36).

The sequential evocation of war and peace, peace and war at the end of Timon evokes the cyclical idea of history and with it the rhythm of fortune. Renaissance emblematics knew of a wheel of fortune that put nations into a circular motion in which peace produced wealth, wealth pride, pride war, war poverty, poverty humility, humility peace, peace wealth, and so on. The emblematics thought this wheel a warning, and its rhythm of fortune was viewed pessimistically by the moralists, as for instance by Richard Barckley:

... A long continued peace engendreth luxuriousness and intemperance, whereof ensueth ... an infinite number of diseases, both of body and mind, that besides many torments that hasten men to their end, it increaseth riches, which bringeth forth covetousness, pride, vain-glory, and ambition which ensueth uncharitable contention by law and effusion of innocent blood by Civil Wars, to the utter ruin and destruction oftentimes of many goodly kingdoms and commonwealths.

Alcibiades and Athens are together on one wheel now, and it will turn as it must.

By making Alcibiades into a character who fails to inspire assurance and by not providing a conclusive ending for the play, Shakespeare refrained from lightening the pessimism. He evidently did not wish to have Timon's faultiness set off by a contrasting example of goodness. Consequently, the foil relationship between the two characters is very subtle, and it tends to make us think somewhat better of Timon than of Alcibiades. Both are faced with ingratitude, but only Timon is really its victim. Both react angrily on the basis of a grudge that they generalize into a quarrel with Athens, but Alcibiades' anger remains colored by personal goals whereas Timon abandons all considerations of himself. In dealing with Athens, Alcibiades may be said merely to apply principles of ordinary Realpolitik, but these have never made good moral prescriptions. Moreover, Alcibiades' credentials as champion of good against evil are weakened by his lax morality and excessive flexibility.

Alcibiades' triumph of fortune in the end resounds with ironies. By the standards of the world, he is a success, the agent of history, and Timon a failure; but it is Timon who
creates as misanthrope the more consistent and spectacular image. Minion of Fortune that Alcibiades is, he remains subject to her changes, whereas Timon takes himself out of the range of her false mutability. Although Alcibiades makes himself revalued by the Athenians and keeps the state going when Timon burns himself out in hatred, Timon's is the more enduring legend.