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Plutarch's Lively Dinner Tables

[*Las animadas mesas de Plutarco*]

by

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> "From the beginnings of ancient literature the notion of death and mortality recurs, in different configurations, in banquet descriptions and convivial texts."
> (Jazdzewska 2013: 301)

Abstract

This paper will look at banquets in the context of non-food related events like assassinations, making an impression, and true character reveals, heavily illustrated by citations from twenty-three different *Parallel Lives*, with a final section on food-related events focusing on Spartan black broth (μέλας ζωμός) as a characterizing device*.

Key-words: Black broth, Banquet, Guests, Antony

Resumen

Este artículo analizará los banquetes en el contexto de situaciones no relacionadas con la comida como asesinatos, intentos por causar una buena impresión y revelación del verdadero carácter, lo que se ilustra mediante citas de veintitrés *Vidas Paralelas* diferentes. Termina con una sección sobre cuestiones que tienen que ver con la comida centradas en el caldo negro (μέλας ζωμός) espartano como un recurso de caracterización*..

Palabras clave: Caldo negro, Banquete, Invitados, Antonio.

* All translations are from or adapted from the Loeb Classical Library.

Introducción

Plutarch, like all ancient writers, had a limited number of venues available to him in which characters could naturally be expected to interact[1]. There was the military arena, where interlocutors could meet before, during, or after battle, or in camp; there was also the political arena, either during formal debate or informal discussion. But the venue of the dinner table was of particular interest because it is in the private sector, yet the participants are in a very public setting[2]. It is internal, intimate, and personal, which is Plutarch's preference for his material, as *Alexander* 1.1 makes clear[3], but it is simultaneously external. In Cinna's dream after Caesar's cremation, the horror of his vision is heightened by the setting:

> [Cinna] dreamed that he was invited to supper by Caesar and declined to go, but that Caesar besought and constrained him, and finally took him by the hand and led him into a yawning and darksome place, whether he followed unwilling and bewildered (*Caesar* 68)[4].

This duality not only invokes the god Dionysus, but invests scenes set at banquets with an additional layer of meaning that adds great depth to the narrative. For instance, banquets have strong overtones of religious sacrifice, as meal scenes in *The Iliad* and Plutarch's beloved Pindar make clear, and this can lend a certain formality to other wise informal scenes. Likewise, banquets feature prominently in drama, one reason Plutarch is so fond of them as a biographical venue. As he says in *Lucullus* 39,

1 This paper builds on an earlier work of mine (TITCHENER 1999) and presented at the conference *Plutarch: Cultural Practice in a Connected World* (Muenster 2020). The author is most grateful for the editorial suggestions.

2 MONTANARI 1999: 72-80.

3 *Alexander* 1.1: "It is the life of Alexander the king, and of Caesar, who overthrew Pompey, that I am writing in this book, and the multitude of the deeds to be treated is so great that I shall make no other preface than to entreat my readers, in case I do not tell of all the famous actions of these men, nor even speak exhaustively at all in each particular case, but in epitome for the most part, not to complain. [2] For it is not Histories that I am writing, but *Lives*; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character than battles where thousands fall, or the greatest armaments, or sieges of cities. [3] Accordingly, just as painters get the likenesses in their portraits from the face and the expression of the eyes, wherein the character shows itself, but make very little account of the other parts of the body, so I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests". (PERRIN 1919a).

4 PERRIN 1919a.

> And is it true that in the life of Lucullus, as in an ancient comedy, one reads in the first part of political measures and military commands, and in the latter part of drinking bouts, and banquets, and what might pass for revel-routs, and torch-races, and all manner of frivolity.

1. *Banquets and assassinations*

In Plutarch's world, a banquet was a surprisingly dangerous place to be, just on general principle. Theseus for instance narrowly escaped assassination at the hands of his future stepmother Medea (*Theseus* 12.2), and evidently failed to learn his lesson since we find him later in the biography breaking up a fight at the wedding-banquet of the Centaurs and Lapiths (*Theseus* 30.3)[5]. Farther east, Cleitus the Black met his fate at Alexander's hands at a banquet in 328 BCE with a strong parallel to the one in which Alexander himself denounced his drunken father Philip some ten years earlier[6]. Of course, Alexander suffered mere exile after that denunciation, but his life was truly in danger, and to be fair, Macedonian banquets probably deserve their own category[7].

Later subjects are well aware of the dangers of attending banquets. Otho[8]'s supporters for instance, anxious to help their hero, make use of the dinner hour:

> ...learning that eighty senators were at supper with Otho, they rushed to the palace, declaring that now was a good time to take off the emperor's enemies at one stroke (*Otho* 3.4)[9].

Otho sneaks his guests out the back way and placates the soldiers while standing on his dinner couch, a wonderfully vivid image.

Failed or reversed assassinations are popular with Plutarch also. Pyrrhus, kings of the Molossians in the late 4th/early 3rd centuries BCE, invites his would-be assassin named, ironically, Neoptolemus, to dinner after hearing of the latter's threat to kill him, and then turns the table and kills Neoptolemus (*Pyrrhus* 5)[10].

5 Perrin 1914a.
6 Perrin 1919a.
7 Macedonian banquets as a literary topic go back at least as far as Herodotus 5.17-20 where in the very late 6th/very early 5th c. BCE Amyntas of Macedon hosted Persian representatives of Darius I. When the Persians took liberties, Amyntas' son Alexander I removed the women on a ruse and substituted them with armed young men, to fatal effect.
8 Marcus Salvius Otho (32 – 69 CE) was the seventh Roman emperor, ruling from January to April 69. He was the second emperor of the Year of the Four Emperors (Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and Vepasian.
9 Perrin 1926.
10 Perrin 1920.

Likewise, Demetrius, king of Macedon (294–288 BC, became aware of a plot against his own life by one Alexander

> ... as Demetrius was on his way to supper at the young man's invitation, some one told him of a plot to kill him in the very midst of the drinking. Demetrius was not at all disturbed, but delayed his coming a little, and ordered his officers to have the troops under arms, and all the attendants and servants in his train (and they were far more numerous that the retinue of Alexander) to go with him into the banqueting hall and remain there until he rose from the table. This frightened Alexander and he did not venture to attempt anything (*Demetrius* 36.4)[11].

Successful assassinations are often more vivid when taking place at dinner parties. For instance, this scene about Artaxerxes, son of Parysatis and Darius II and king of the Achaemenid Empire 405-358 BCE, is right out of a modern detective novel:

> It was a bird . . . according to Ctesias, that Parysatis cut in two with a little knife smeared with poison on one side, thus wiping the poison off upon one part only of the bird; the undefiled and wholesome part she then put into her own mouth and ate, but gave to Stateira the poisoned part (*Artaxerxes.* 19.3)[12].

The successful assassination of Sertorius, a key figure in the late Roman republic who was on the wrong side of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey, depended to a large extend on psychology, and the particular amenity of the banquet couch:

> Now the suppers at which Sertorius was present were always marked by restraint and decorum, since he would not consent to see or hear anything that was disgraceful, but held his associates to the practice of indulging only in mirth and merriment that was decorous and restrained. On this occasion, however, when the drinking was well underway, the guests, seeking occasion for a quarrel, openly indulged in dissolute language, and pretending to be drunk, committed many indecencies with the hope of angering Sertorius. But he, either because he was vexed at their disorderly conduct, or because he had become aware of their purpose from the boldness of their talk and their unwonted contempt for his wishes, changed his posture on the couch and threw himself upon his back, as though he neither heard nor regarded them. But when Perpenna, after tak-

[11] PERRIN 1920.
[12] PERRIN 1926.

> ing a cup of wine in his hands, dropped it as he was drinking and made a clatter with it, which was their signal, Antonius, who reclined above Sertorius on the couch, smote him with his sword. Sertorius turned at the blow and would have risen with his assailant, but Antonius fell upon his chest and sized both his hands, so that he could make no defence even, and died from the blows of many (*Sertorius* 26.3)[13].

But the most entertaining assassination at a banquet surely took place when Pelopidas and his comrades liberated the Cadmeia[14]:

> Now that the fitting time for their undertaking seemed to have come, they sallied forth in two bands; one, under the lead of Pelopidas and Damocleidas, against Leontidas and Hypates, who lived near together, the other against Archias and Philip, under Charon and Melon, who had put on women's apparel over their breastplates, and wore thick garlands of pine and fir which shaded their faces. For this reason, when they stood at the door of the banquet-room, at first the company shouted and clapped their hands, supposing that the women whom they had long been expecting were come. But then, after surveying the banquet and carefully marking each of the reclining guests, the visitors drew their swords, and rushing through the midst of the tables at Archias and Philip, revealed who they were. A few of the guests were persuaded by Phillidas to remain quiet, but the rest, who, with the polemarchs, offered resistance and tried to defend themselves, were dispatched without any trouble, since they were drunk (*Pelopidas* 11.1)[15].

As these examples show, banquets provided many opportunities for assassination. There are inevitably strangers in the form of servers, entertainers, or guests, who might prove to be dangerous, not to mention the universality of the dining experience. Deception is everywhere whether in poisoned fruit, men disguised as women, or just people who are not who they say they are.

2. *Banquets and making an impression*

As well as providing opportunities for eliminating political enemies, banquets also provided good opportunities for impressing them. The up-and-coming tyrant frequently used banquets to make friends, as we see in the Macedoniann court:

13 Perrin 1919b.
14 See footnote 3 for details on this episode.
15 Perrin 1917.

> Moreover, by flattering the Macedonian soldiery extravagantly and lavishing money upon them for banquets and sacrifices, in a short time they (i.e. Peucestas, Eumenes' friend, and the other satraps made soft by Persian life) made the camp a hostelry of festal prodigality, and the army a mob to be cajoled into the election of its generals, as in a democracy" (*Eumenes* 13.5)[16].

The Roman *Lives* yield us four good exempla of this phenomenon:

> Catiline, the famous Roman conspirator who attempted violently to replace the consuls of 63 BCE, pulled the same trick after he "had corrupted a large part of the young men in the city, supplying each of them continually with amusements, banquets, and amours, and furnishing without stint the money to spend on these things (*Cicero* 10.5)[17].

> Sulla, the famous Roman dictator who died in 79 BCE did no less: On consecrating the tenth of all his substance to Hercules, Sulla feasted the people sumptuously, and his provision for them was so much beyond what was needed that great quantities of meats were daily cast into the river, and wine was drunk that was forty years old and upwards (*Sulla* 35)[18].

Lucullus, the wealthy Roman general who fought Mithridates from 73-69 and was a notorious gourmand ,

> The daily repasts of Lucullus were such as the newly rich affect. Not only with his dyed coverlet and beakers set with precious stones, and choruses and dramatic recitations, but also with his dishes, did he make himself the envy of the vulgar (*Lucullus* 40)[19].

A certain Vibius, learning that Crassus[20] was hiding in a cave on Vibius' land, took the opportunity to ingratiate himself with a potentially powerful patron by leaving meals in the general vicinity of the cave:

> Now, the meals were abundant and so prepared as to gratify the taste and not merely satisfy hunger. For Vibius had made up his mind to pay Crassus every sort of friendly attention, and it even occurred to him to consider the youth of his guest, that he was quite a young man, and that some provision must be made for the enjoyments appropriate

16 PERRIN 1919b.
17 PERRIN 1919a.
18 PERRIN 1916b.
19 Perrin 1914b.
20 Crassus was a very wealthy Roman politician who was a member of the first triumvirate with Pompey and Caesar.

> to his years; the mere supply of his wants he regarded as the work of one who rendered help under compulsion rather than with ready zeal (*Crassus* 5.1-3)[21].

In all these cases, food (especially exotic or fancy) is used as a tool to bribe or manipulate crowds or individuals. Catiline, Sulla, and Lucullus manipulated individals with money, ostentation, and lots of special food. Crassus on the other hand was being manipulated by luxury, including food. This is an interesting distinction of character among those four men none of whom Plutarch likes or admires.

So perhaps it is not surprising that banquets were as good as place to insult people as they were for making friends or at least a good impression. We are reminded again of Alexander's disastrous experience at his father Philip's wedding banquet where Alexander taunts his drunken father who is prevented only by Philip's extreme drunkenness from physically attacking his son Alexander (*Alexander* 9.3-5).

Potheinus in Egypt exploited this opportunity to display contempt for Caesar right in front of him, in a public setting, not hiding his intentions:

> ... the eunuch Potheinus, who had most influence at court, and had recently killed Pompey; he had also driven Cleopatra from the country, and was not secretly plotting against Caesar. On this account they say that from this time on Caesar passed whole nights at drinking parties in order to protect himself. But in his open acts also Potheinus was unbearable, since he said and did many things that were invidious and insulting to Caesar . . . and that the state suppers he used wooden and earthen dishes, on the ground that Caesar had taken all the gold and silver in payment of a debt (*Caesar* 48.7)[22].

Another example of public contempt for a distinguished individual away from home, is Aratus, the victorious Sicyonian general who ultimately advised Philip V of Macedon ca. 224 BCE, and like Alexander III, had suffered abuse at the Macedonian court:

> For this reason, too, the royal courtiers were all the more envious of him, and since they could accomplish nothing by their secret calumnies, they took to abusing and insulting him openly at their banquets, with greater wantonness and scurrility; and once they actually pursued and threw stones at him as he was going to his tent after supper. At this Philip was enraged, and for the nonce fined them twenty talents; afterwards, however, regarding

[21] Perrin 1916a.
[22] Perrin 1919a.

> them as a noxious and confusing element in his affairs, he put them to death (*Aratus* 48.7)[23].

Plutarch here takes the opportunity to reinforce his characterization of Macedonians as out of control and impulsive by ending his anecdote with the execution of the nasty courtiers.

Finally, Geminius, Antony's friend, was poorly treated at Cleopatra's court because the queen suspected that Geminius was an agent of Octavia, Antony's wife:

> ... [Geminius] was always put upon with jokes at supper and insulted with places of no honour at table, but he endured all this and waited for an opportunity to confer with Antony. Once, however, at supper, being bidden to tell the reasons for his coming, he replied that the rest of his communication required a sober head, but one thing he knew, whether he was drunk or sober, and that was that all would be well if Cleopatra was sent off to Egypt. . . . And Cleopatra's flatterers drove away many of the other friends of Antony also who could not endure their drunken tricks and scurrilities (*Antony* 59)[24].

These examples show the effectiveness of banquets as almost theatrical venues since they are public, the various kinds of display were used to impress or reject often featured luxury goods, and the opportunities for self-expression were numerous.

3. *Banquets and Sparring*

Finally, the banquet was often the scene of non-military battles, or wars of wit and will. Galba, not always thought of as a swift thinker, used a banquet to put Vinius, an obsequious courtier, in his place:

> While he was at supper with Claudius Caesar, [Vinius] purloined a silver drinking-cup, and Caesar, learning of it, invited him to supper again the next day, and when he came, ordered the attendants to set before him no silver plate at all, but only earthenware (*Galba* 12.3)[25].

Likewise, Lucullus got the last laugh on Cicero, who sought to expose the former's famously luxurious way of living as exclusively for public consumption:

> "We desire," said Cicero, "to dine with you today just as you would have dined by yourself." Lucullus demurred to this, and begged the privilege of selecting a later day, but they refused to allow it, nor would they suffer him to confer with his servants, that he might not order any thing more

[23] Perrin 1926.
[24] PERRIN 1920.
[25] PERRIN 1926.

> provided than what was provided for himself. Thus much, however, and no more, they did allow him at his request, namely, that he would dine that day in the Apollo. Now this was the name of one of his costly apartments and he thus outwitted the men without their knowing it. For each of his dining-rooms, as it seems, had a fixed allowance for the dinner served there, as well as its own special apparatus and equipment, so that his slaves, on hearing where he wished to dine, knew just how much the dinner was to cost, and what were to be its decorations and arrangements (*Lucullus* 41.3-5)[26].

Here, the joke revolves not so much around Lucullus' circumventing Cicero but rather that Lucullus was not only prone to such extravagant behavior but that he had institutionalized this with a plan. Not only the food but its presentation was meant to be delightful and stimulating. Lucullus' solitary dining habits are indeed verified elsewhere as luxurious:

> And once, when he was dining alone, and a modest repast of one course had been prepared for him, he was angry, and summoned the servant who had the matter in charge. The servant said that he did not suppose, since there were no guests, that he wanted anything very costly. "What sayest thou?" said the master, "dost thou not know that today Lucullus dines with Lucullus? (*Lucullus* 41)[27].

This is a very interesting banquet with only one guest, and that guest must be treated with the same hospitality and served an impressive meal. Lucullus suggests that he as the guest is being insulted by the host.

The most romantic war of wills taking place at banquets must be that between Antony and Cleopatra:

> Antony sent, therefore, and invited [Cleopatra] to supper, but she thought it meet that he should rather come to her. At once, then, wishing to display his complacency and friendly feelings, Antony obeyed and went . . . on the following day Antony feasted her in turn, and was ambitious to surpass her splendour and elegance.

And indeed the banquet continues as an important scene of interaction between the lovers: "For [Antony and Cleopatra] had an association called The Inimitable Livers, and every day they feasted one another, making their expenditures of incredible profusion" in which pursuit Plutarch says Antony squandered "that which Antiphon calls the most costly outlay, namely, time" (*Antony* 28.3.6)[28].

26 Perrin 1914b.
27 Perrin 1914b.
28 Perrin 1920.

It is further revealed in this anecdote that eight different meals are cooked in close succession so that whenever the diners are ready, dinner will be perfect. Plutarch makes the most of this rather distasteful alliance by using it as one half of a very effective "mirror passage", when after his defeat at Actium, Antony eventually abandoned the Timoneum, went back to Cleopatra, and together they "turned the city to the enjoyment of suppers and drinking-bouts and distributions of gifts ... Cleopatra and Antony now dissolved their famous society of Inimitable Livers, and founded another, not at all inferior to that in daintiness and luxury and extravagant outlay, which they called the society of Partners in Death" (*Antony* 71). Of all the ways Plutarch can illustrate the scale of the lovers' outrageous behavior, it is again food that makes the point—we can all relate to this.

4. *Banquets and true character revealed*

Finally, Plutarch uses banquets liberally as theaters for the displaying of individual's true colours, or real selves, especially with the wine flowing freely. Alcibiades once used a dinner party as a way to express his licentious character:

This man was a lover of his, who, entertaining some friends, asked Alcibiades also to the dinner. Alcibiades declined the invitation, but after having drunk deep at home with some friends, went in revel rout to the house of Anytus, took his stand at the door of the men's chamber, and, observing the tables full of gold and silver beakers, ordered his slaves to take half of them and carry them home for him. He did not deign to go in, but played this prank and was off. The guests were naturally indignant, and declared that Alcibiades had treated Anytus with gross and overweening insolence. 'Not so,' said Anytus, 'but with moderation and kindness; he might have taken all there were: he has left us half.' (*Alcibiades* 4.6)[29].

Here the insult is enhanced by the fact that Alcibiades turned down the party invitation but showed up anyway and left with half the gold and silver table setting. Plutarch's joke in this anecdote, "It could have been worse!", refers both to Alcibiades' nasty treatment of him as well as the financial loss.

A certain panache vis-a-vis banquet arranging was definitely a mark in someone's favor, but the main attraction in Plutarch's view should be companionship and conversation. Crassus, otherwise disliked by Plutarch, is admired for his dinner parties:

> When he entertained at table, his invited guests were for the most plebeians and men of the people, and the simplicity of the repast was combined with a neatness and good cheer which gave

[29] PERRIN 1916b.

> more pleasure than lavish expenditures (*Crassus* 3.1)[30].

Even Cato the Elder, the Roman censor notorious through the years for his extreme frugality and distrust of Carthage during the Punic Wars, by these standards is an excellent host:

> The dinners, too, which he gave in the country, were quite plentiful. He always asked in congenial country neighbours, and made merry with them, and not only did those of his own age find in him an agreeable and much desired companion, but also the young. For he was a man of large experience, who had read and heard much that was well worth repeating. He held the table to be the very best promoter of friendship, and at his own, the conversation turned much to the praise of honourable and worthy citizens, greatly to the neglect of those who were worthless and base. About such Cato suffered no table-talk, either by way of praise or blame (*Cato Maior* 25.1-3)[31].

It is ironic that Plutarch says that when Cato became wealthy, he treated his slaves much worse than when he was relatively poor, and uses an example of Cato finding fault with the cooking and presentation of a banquet (21.3). The biographer admires the emphasis on conversation and debate at these parties and uses it to contrast banquets conspicuous for display and ostentation.

Aemilius Paullus, friend to Greeks, was another Roman noteworthy for giving banquets, and also for the company and conversation being of more importance than opulent dishes or settings:

> He also held all sorts of games and contests and performed sacrifices to the gods, at which he gave feasts and banquets, making liberal allowances therefore from the royal treasure, while in the arrangement and ordering of them, in saluting and seating his guests, and in paying to each one that degree of honour and kindly attention which was properly his due, he showed such nice and thoughtful perception that the Greeks were amazed, seeing that not even their pastimes were treated by him with neglect, but that, although he was a man of such great affairs, he gave even to trifling things their due attention. And he was also delighted to find that, though preparations for entertainment were ever so many and splendid, he himself was the pleasantest sight to his guests and gave them most enjoyment; and he used to say to those who wondered at his attention to details that the same spirit was required

30 Perrin 1916a.
31 Perrin 1914b.

> both in marshaling a line of battle and in presiding at a banquet well, the object being, in the one case, to cause most terror in the enemy, in the other, to give most pleasure to the company (*Aemilius Paullus* 28.7)[32].

Here we have not only the contrast of conversation vs. sensuality, but we see here another element of games, and a religious infusion with the sacrifices. Plutarch also likes very much that Paullus paid great attention to small matters, something he values himself as an active citizen in Chaeronea[33]. Socializing through banquets and symposia was an important part of civic life. That may be why it was very much held against Nicias that he "would neither dine with a fellow citizen, nor indulge in general interchange of views or familiar social intercourse" (*Nicias* 5)[34]. Themistocles (2.5)[35] and Pericles (7.4)[36] are both praised for changing their boisterous adolescent ways for those of a restrained senior statesman, but what Plutarch praises is their maturation, something we don't see in *Nicias*.

5. *Banquets and comparison*

Plutarch uses food and dining behavior as one of his many comparative devices, particularly in the *Parallel Lives*. This comparison of dining habits can be seen in Plutarch's treatment of famous fathers and sons, as in the case of Tiberius Gracchus:

> Moreover, Q. Metellus upbraided Tiberius with the reminder that whenever his father, during his censorship, was returning home after a supper, the citizens put out their lights, for fear they might be thought to be indulging immoderately in entertainments and drinking bouts, whereas Tiberius himself was lighted on his way at night by the neediest and most reckless of the populace (*Gracchi* 14.3-4)[37].

Phocion, likewise, was distressed at his son's propensity for fancy banquets and took rather drastic measures to straighten the young man out:

> When Phocus his son wished to compete at the Panathenaic festival as a vaulting rider of horses, Phocion permitted it, not because he was ambitious for the victory, but in order that care and training for the body might make his son a better man; for in general the youth was fond of wine and irregular in his habits.

[32] PERRIN 1918.
[33] See for instance Plutarch's essays on old men in government or how to run the government (PERRIN 1921).
[34] PERRIN 1916a.
[35] PERRIN 1914b.
[36] PERRIN 1916a.
[37] PERRIN 1921.

> The youth was victorious, and many asked him to their houses for the victor's banquet; but Phocion declined the other invitations and granted the coveted honour to one host only. And when he went to the banquet and saw the general magnificence of the preparations, and particularly the foot-basins of spiced wine that were brought to the guests as they entered, he called his son and said 'Phocus, do not let thy companion ruin thy victory.' Moreover, wishing to remove the young man entirely from that style of living, he took him off to Sparta... (*Phocion* 20.1-2)[38].

Here the contrast is old and young men, not among men of different times or places. As shown above, Plutarch is quite tolerant of adolescent antics and considers character development an important aspect of life, but he has very little tolerance for excessive behavior in adults. He approves of both Metellus's and Phocion's actions.

In contrast to the wild young men who need correcting is the noble Sextus Pompey, son of the general Pompey and noted sailor who was loudly opposed to Octavian, the future Augustus:

> After it had been agreed that S. Pompey should have Sardinia and Sicily, should keep the sea clear of robbers, and should send up to Rome a stipulated amount of grain, they invited one another to supper. Lots were cast, and it was the lot of Pompey to entertain the others first. And when Antony asked him where the supper would be held, "There," said he, pointing to his admiral's ship with its six banks of oars, "for this is the ancestral house that is left to Pompey." . . . when their good fellowship was at its height and the jokes about Antony and Cleopatra were in full career, Menas the pirate came up to Pompey and said, so that the others could not hear, "Shall I cut the ship's cables and make thee master, not of Sicily and Sardinia, but of the whole Roman empire?" Pompey, on hearing this, communed with himself a little while, and then said: "Menas, you ought to have done this without speaking to me about it beforehand; but now let us be satisfied with things as they are; for perjury (epiorkein) is not my way." Pompey, then, after being feasted in turn by Antony and (Octavian) Caesar, sailed back to Sicily (*Antony* 32.3).

We feel Sextus Pompey's distress about how to use the information he learned from Menas without being dishonorable. Although the plan would indeed have made him master of the Roman empire, it is treacherous to betray guests. If Menas, a pirate and presumably rough character, had performed this action

[38] Perrin 1919b.

unbeknownst to Sextus, there would presumably be no treachery since no one would expect Menas to behave differently whereas Sextus is heir to an ancient and noble family. If Menas had acted on his own that would have been fine, but Sextus can't bring himself to authorize the act personally. So the problem does not center on the act itself but rather who performs it.

It is clear from these many examples that Plutarch uses banquets to heighten the difference between and among individuals, civilizations, and occasions. As is Plutarch's general purpose[39] in his *Parallel Lives* is to provide good examples for his readers to emulate, his specific purpose in these banquet scenes is for readers to use their own experience as a gauge to measure how strange or different their own lives are from the characters they are reading about, emulating or avoiding those behaviors in their own lives[40].

6. *A Special Case: Spartan black broth as a characterizing device*

Among the Hellenes, the Spartans stood out for lots of reasons including their foundation stories, their dyarchic government, their educational system, and of course their intense focus on military readiness. It is not surprising that their foodways should also be different. Their (in)famous blood-and-guts soup known as black broth (μέλας ζωμός) was an easy way to convey in shorthand how very different the Spartans were from everyone else[41]. The examples below make this clear and share to different extents the following similarities. Individuals voluntarily try the broth to improve their understanding of the Spartans, or explain that Spartan broth requires a Spartan lifestyle to appreciate, even for Persians, Egyptians or Athenians who find themselves in an unplanned Spartan-type situation. And finally, the Spartans themselves used black broth to demonstrate their imperviousness to physical discomfort and their commitment to strength (since the broth was famously said to provide such high-powered nutrition that older men went without it so the younger soldiers would get the full benefit) (*Instituta Laconica* 236F) (Babbitt 1931). The following examples illustrate those ideas.

Herodotus offers the following Persian War anecdote in which the Spartans humiliate the vanquished Persians by setting up two simultaneous

39 *Pericles* 1.2-2 (PERRIN 1916a).

40 For a survey of scholarship on the special nature of banquets and symposia for characterization see TITCHENER 2011.

41 For Spartan black broth, see KOKOSZKO 2020: passim; for Spartan food in general, see *Food in the Ancient World* (WILKINS & HILL 2006, esp. pp. 96-97 and 174-76) and WILKINS & NADEAU 2015: passim.. For the Spartan mess, see BOTERF 2017, FIGUEIRA 1984, and VAN WEES 2018.

dinners, one Spartan style and one Persian, asking what the Persians who already lived so luxuriously had to gain from conquering Spartans:

> This other story is also told. Xerxes in his flight from Hellas having left to Mardonius his own establishment, Pausanias, seeing Mardonius' establishment with its display of gold and silver and gaily-colored tapestry, bade the bakers and the cooks to prepare a dinner in such wise as they were wont to do for Mardonius. They did his bidding; whereat Pausanias, when he saw golden and silver couches richly covered, and tables of gold and silver, and all the magnificent service of the banquet, was amazed at the splendor before him, and for a jest bade his own servants prepare a dinner after Laconian fashion. When that meal was ready and was far different from the other, Pausanias fell a-laughing, and sent for the generals of the Greeks. They being assembled, Pausanias pointed to the fashion after which either dinner was served, and said "Men of Hellas, I have brought you hither because I desired to show you the foolishness of the leader of the Medes; who, with such provision for life as you see, came hither to take away from ours, that is so pitiful" (Herodotus 9.82[42]; cf. the miscellany writer Athenaeus writing at the time of Marcus Aurelius, 4.138b below)[43].

Plutarch includes a truncated version of this in his Spartan sayings:

> After the victory at Plataea over the Persians he ordered that the dinner which had been prepared for the Persians should be served to himself and his officers. As this had a wondrous sumptuousness, he said, "By Heaven, the Persian was a greedy fellow who, when he had all this, came after our barley-cake" (*Apophthegmata Laconica* 230E)[44].

Another way to characterize the Spartans' intensity was to situate the black broth in the context of other physical suffering as the example below shows. Men who were hungry or thirsty enough would eat or drink without complaint, as the examples below show. Most would not ever get to that point, but the Spartans did quite regularly as we see in Athenaeus:

> The marvelous Xenophon as well says that a hungry man enjoys eating a barley-cake and cress, and a thirsty man is happy to get water from a river to drink. Socrates was often caught walking

[42] Godley 1925.
[43] Olson 2006.
[44] Babbitt 1931.

> around in front of his house late at night; when people asked him "Why are you doing this now", he said he was collecting some *opson* for his dinner (*Deipnosophistai* 4.157.e)[45].

Cicero seems to approve of this attitude while not looking forward to sharing it.

> And similar reasoning is also applied to food, and the costly splendour of banquets is belittled, because they say nature is contented with little elaboration. For who does not see that need is the seasoning for all such things? When Darius in his flight drank muddy water polluted by corpses, he said he had never had a more delightful drink; obviously he had never before been thirsty when he drank. And Ptolemy had never been hungry when he ate: for when he was on a progress through Egypt and was parted from his escort and given coarse bread in a cottage, it seemed to him that nothing was more delightful than this bread. Socrates, it is said, would walk hard till evening, and when he was asked in consequence why he did so, he replied that by talking he was getting hunger as a relish to make a better dinner. Again! Do we not know of the fare put before the Lacedaemonians at their public meals? When the tyrant Dionysius dined with them he said that the black broth which was the staple of the meal was not to his taste; whereupon the cook who had made it said: "No wonder; for you did not have the seasoning." "What is that pray?" said the tyrant. "Toil in hunting, sweat, a run down to the Eurotas, hunger, thirst; for such things are the seasoning of the feasts of Lacedemonians" (*Tusculanae Disputationes* 5.97-98)[46].

A thing that met with especial approval among them was their so-called black broth, so much so that the older men did not require a bit of meat but gave up all of it to the young men. It is said that Dionysius, the despot of Sicily, for the sake of this bought a slave who had been a Spartan cook, and ordered him to prepare the broth for him, sparing no expense; but when the king tasted it he spat it out in disgust; whereupon the cook said, "Your Majesty, it is necessary to have exercised in the Spartan manner,

45 OLSON 2006.

46 KING 1927. Cf. "Those of this age have for relish the game that they kill; if they fail to kill any, then cresses. Now, if anyone thinks that they do not enjoy eating, when they have only cresses with their bread, or that they do not enjoy drinking when they drink only water, let him remember how sweet barley bread and wheaten bread taste when one is hungry, and how sweet water is to drink when one is thirsty." (*Cyropaedia* 1.2.11; MILLER 1914).

and to have bathed in the Eurotas, in order to relish this broth" (*Instituta Laconica* 236F).

In sum, eating Spartan food voluntarily was the mark of a true man, one who did not shrink from doing what needed to be done even if it meant eating unpalatable food. Athenaeus' Sybarite is brutal in his back-handed compliment to the Spartans, and yet it is clear that he himself had eaten this same food meaning that he could keep up with the big boys at least in this area of their military training:

> Some authorities also report that a Sybarite who had spent time in Sparta and eaten with them in the public messes said:
>
> "It's no surprise that the Spartans are the bravest men there are; anyone with any sense would rather die a million times than share such a miserable life!" (*Deipnosophistai* 4.138b)[47].

And yet food available to them at that time at least during some of the year included beef, goat, pork, lamb, boar, deer, rabbit, dove, partridge, pigeon, geese, ducks, many kinds of fish, crabs, shellfish, octopus, squid, melons, oranges, lemons, quince, figs, grapes, pomegranates, pears, milk, cheese, eggs, almonds, olive oil, honey, beans, peas, lentils, lettuce, celery, asparagus, spinach, onions, radish, cabbage, beets, turnips[48]. Was the Spartan way of life really that bad or was their food part of the mirage?[49]

7. *Conclusion*

Plutarch in his *Parallel Lives* tries to give us good examples to imitate by showing us character as revealed through action, and banquets are one of his favorite venues for showing human behavior in action and to illustrate differences between and among people for the edification of his audience—everyone has to eat, and everyone has opinions about food, its production, preparation, and consumption. He likes to use dining examples from other cultures to highlight those differences, as described earlier when various individuals voluntarily try the infamous black broth to improve their understanding of the Spartans or explain that Spartan broth requires a Spartan lifestyle to appreciate, even for Persians, Egyptians or Athenians who would be expected to have their own traditions and therefore have a suitably strong reaction. Although he wrote about great men and important events, Plutarch always was clear that his purpose was not history but biography, and that small details could often convey more nuance than descriptions of major battles. In his own words,

47 Olson 2006.
48 Amouretti 2013: 81-90; Wilkins & Hill 41, citing Alcman, Athenaeus, and Dicaearchus.
49 Van Wees points out that ironically the horrible black broth was "relatively costly since it required slaughtering a pig" (2018. 249)..

> Convivial occasions have a way of breaking down the most majestic demeanour, and in familiar relationships it is hard to keep up an imposing exterior which is assumed for appearances' sake. On the other hand, genuine virtue can only be more impressive the more it is seen, and the daily life of a really good man is never so much admired by the outside world as it is by his intimate friends (*Pericles* 7.3)[50].

For Plutarch as a biographer, communal meals and food are particularly attractive framing elements as he sets out to show not just what happened but how those things happened, what the human level of his narrative revealed.

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[50] PERRIN 1916a.

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