So the reader who knows Greek will encounter the name of Hermes in a way similar to what I am arguing above.[13]

Why might Virgil deploy his remarkably broad knowledge of literature and language like this? One reason is contained in the subtitle of O'Hara's book *True Names*. He was fully imbued with the Alexandrian tradition of etymological wordplay, especially as found everywhere in one of Virgil's preferred models, Callimachus.[14] But in the case of hiding gods I wonder if their subtle presence through acrostics and paronomasia might enact their numinous distance from mortal experience. As in life, so in literature: while the gods may surround us, it sometimes takes a *uates* to point them out.

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HONEY IN PLUTARCH: A BITTERSWEET EXPERIENCE

ABSTRACT

The middle-Platonic tendencies of Plutarch are not only pervasive in his philosophical ideas; his temperate approach to life can be appreciated in many other contexts, and the culinary world is no exception. Particularly interesting, given his moderate views, is his depiction of foods bringing opposites together to create balance. This article first considers the combination of the opposite concepts of γλυκύς *(sweet) and* πικρός *(bitter) in Plutarch in general; then, with reference to food consumption, it studies references to honey, both in association with a bitter element and when honey itself is described as both sweet and bitter. The article surveys the appearance of honey in other sources to obtain a wider picture before drawing conclusions with regard to Plutarch's own literary creation.*

Keywords: Plutarch; honey; bitter; sweet; health; balance

In the avoidance of polar opposites man may find moderation. Plutarch preached a philosophical quest for the right balance and the proper measure of things. This approach to life he embeds in his *œuvre* by way of comparisons, images, anecdotes and anything that helps his readership to better comprehend the value of moderation.

In the first section of this paper, I focus on how Plutarch ponders the juxtaposition of opposites and the resulting consequences by resorting to vocabulary of two primary

[13] For other examples of suppressed divine names in Virgil, see e.g. O'Hara (n. 11), 158 (Hecate), 169 and 171 (Charon), 226–7 (Juturna).

[14] See, most recently, J.J. Clauss, 'The Near Eastern background of aetiological wordplay in Callimachus', in J.J.H. Klooster, M.A. Harder, R.F. Regtuit, G.C. Wakker (edd.), *Callimachus Revisited: New Perspectives in Callimachean Scholarship* (Leuven and Paris, 2019) (= *Hellenistica Groningana* 24 [2019]), 65–96, J.J. Clauss and S. Noegel, 'Near Eastern poetics in Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo*', *HSPh* 113 (2023), 141–99.

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tastes: γλυκύς (sweet) and πικρός (bitter). Following this, I focus on the various uses the author makes of one particular food, honey, first embodying the epitome of sweetness, then being placed in combination with a bitter element and finally representing a perfect combination of both sweet and bitter on its own.[1] I will conclude with some remarks regarding Plutarch's style, based on his use of this substance.

1. AN EXAMPLE OF OPPOSITES: SWEET AND BITTER

Plutarch seems fond of resorting to opposite concepts to illustrate a point. In some cases, these references are introduced in the general conversation, as in *Quaest. conv.* 684B, where the discussion centres on the astounding contraposing qualities between the (bitter) tree of origin and the resulting (sweet) fruit, the fig. In other occurrences the allusion is inserted as a helpful visual to ponder philosophical questions, as in *Adv. Col.* 1110D, where the discussion focusses on the absolute value of qualities, such as colour (e.g. white and blue) or taste (e.g. sweet and bitter).

He even uses the combination of both terms together, γλυκύπικρος ('bittersweet', 'sweetly bitter')[2] on two occasions: in *Quaest. conv.* 681B, when discussing the feelings caused by love, and in *De cur.* 522C, regarding the effects of curiosity:

> The answering glances of the young and the beautiful and the stream of influence from their eyes, whether it be light or a current of particles, melts the lovers and destroys them, **amid pleasure commingled with pain, a pleasure that they themselves call 'bittersweet'** (μεθ' ἡδονῆς ἀλγηδόνι μεμιγμένης, ἣν αὐτοὶ γλυκύπικρον ὀνομάζουσιν).[3]

> **So bittersweet, so uncontrollable is the itching of curiosity** (οὕτω τίς ἐστι γλυκύπικρος καὶ ἀκατάσχετος ὁ τῆς πολυπραγμοσύνης γαργαλισμός), like the itching of a sore which gets bloody whenever we scratch it.

2. THE (BITTER)SWEETEST FOOD: HONEY

Naturally, the most obvious occasion for combining the terms γλυκύς and πικρός is when discussing food properly.[4] Honey was one of the sweetest and most nutritious foods, both because of its taste and, symbolically, because of its many benefits. It was used as the most common sweetener (Apicius, *De re coq*. 1.12); and in a wide range of recipes, both sweet and savoury, such as the ones which Plutarch mentions: *De Her. mal*. 859F (honey and sesame bars), *De esu* 995C (mixed with oil, fish sauce, vinegar, Syriac and Arabic spices, to accompany meat dishes).

Plutarch often associates honey with another component, a bitter one. In *Quaest. conv.* 709E honey is not the remedy, but contributes to smoothing the intake of the medicine:

[1] On the topic of honey and honey makers in antiquity, see P. Fernández Uriel, *Dones del cielo: abeja y miel en el Mediterráneo antiguo* (Madrid, 2012); L. Cilliers and F.P. Retief, 'Bees, honey and health in antiquity', *Akroterion* 53 (2008), 7–19; H.M. Ransome, *The Ancient Bee in Ancient Times and Folklore* (London, 1986[2]).

[2] It appears this term was coined by Sappho: fr. 81 in C. Neri, *Saffo. Testimonianze e frammenti* (Berlin, 2021).

[3] English translations are those of the Loeb Classical Library. Highlights in bold are mine.

[4] For sweet and bitter tastes in antiquity see L.B. Totelin, 'Tastes in ancient botany, medicine and science', in K.C. Rudolph (ed.), *Taste and the Ancient Senses* (London, 2017), 60–71.

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We ought not to accept, nor tamely let a good friend be the means of getting us a worthless one, **as if we were taking bitter medicine in honey** (ὥσπερ διὰ μέλιτος φάρμακον λαμβάνοντας).

In a another conversation, *Quaest. conv.* 672B, the sweetness of honey is counterbalanced in some rites by the addition of roots:

Even up to the present time those of the barbarians who do not make wine drink mead, **counteracting the sweetness somewhat by the use of winelike bitter roots** (ὑποφαρμάσσοντες τὴν γλυκύτητα οἰνώδεσι ῥίζαις καὶ αὐστηραῖς).

The combination of two opposite elements that balance each other's qualities for beneficial purposes is rather common. Plutarch offers the same results by turning to honey alone, now acting as both bitter and sweet by itself. See, for instance, *De ad. et am*. 59D:[5]

Errors are the domain of the true candour of friendship, and if it is cruel, that is only because it is helpful and kind: **like honey, it makes injuries sting** (ὥσπερ τὸ μέλι τὰ ἡλκωμένα δάκνουσα) and cleanses them, but that is its only painful aspect, and **otherwise its action is benign and pleasant** (τἆλλα δ' ὠφέλιμος οὖσα καὶ γλυκεῖα).

Honey remains wholly helpful to man.[6] And its results depend on the quality of the making. There were different categories of honey depending on its origin—the honey from Mt Hymettus, in Attica, being the best according to several authors (Pliny, *HN* 11.32–3; Dioscorides, *De mat. med.* 2.82)—or on the flowers used in its composition—thyme, for instance, was top-notch (Aristotle, *Hist. an.* 626a; Varro, *Rust*. 111.16; Pliny, *HN* 11.38–9).

Plutarch alludes to this paradox, namely that the toughest plant makes the sweetest honey, in *De aud.* 41F (and in *De aud. poet.* 32E, without explicitly naming thyme[7]):

One ought therefore to strip off the superfluity and inanity from the style, and to seek after the fruit itself, imitating not women that make garlands, but the bees. For those women, culling flower-clusters and sweet-scented leaves, intertwine and plait them, and produce something that is pleasant enough, but short-lived and fruitless; whereas the bees in their flight frequently pass through meadows of violets, roses, and hyacinths, and **come to rest upon the exceeding rough and pungent thyme** (ἐπὶ τὸν τραχύτατον καὶ δριμύτατον θύμον καταίρουσι), and on this they settle close, 'Making the yellow honey their care' (Simon. fr. 593 *PMG*), and when they have got something of use, they fly away home to their own special work.

The right selection of flowers not only lends category and taste to each type of honey, but can also make it wholly inedible, like Corsican honey, which was extremely bitter according to Pliny (*HN* 21.13) and Diodorus Siculus (5.14). We also have records (Xen. *An*. 4.8.20; Strab. 12.3.18) that the honey from Pontus would make a person lose their mind, go mad, be sick for days and even die, which modern scientific studies have

[5] Similarly in *Phoc.* 2.3, where Plutarch compares the stingy effect of honey on wounds to the stingy effect true and prudent words have on the fool.

[6] This paper focusses on honey made by bees; in antiquity—broadly speaking, in Mesopotamian, Hebrew, Egyptian, Greek and Roman cultures—the words used for honey could also, without further specification, mean 'tree sap'. More on this distinction and its relevance for accurately understanding certain ancient texts in J.A. Kelhoffer, 'John the Baptist's "wild honey" and "honey" in antiquity', *GRBS* 45 (2005), 59–73.

[7] In this case he just mentions ἐν τοῖς δριμυτάτοις ἄνθεσι καὶ τοῖς τραχυτάταις ἀκάνθαις ('amid the most pungent flowers and the roughest thorns').

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attributed to some components in venomous flowers, like rhododendrons and azaleas.[8] So honey may be sweet but also deadly.

In any case, when Plutarch mentioned honey's 'sting' (δάκνουσα), he was not referring to bad taste, but to its use as an ointment in open wounds (τὰ ἡλκωμένα). And while still today honey serves as a natural remedy in some ways,[9] back in time its medicinal properties were many: eye illness, baldness, intestinal problems, uterine issues, ulcers, gastric and renal sickness, halitosis, fever, haemorrhoids, burns, low energy (Pliny, *HN* 22.24; Dioscorides, *De mat. med.* 2.82; Celsus, *Med.* 1.2–4).

Plutarch does not particularly delve into this use of honey. Was it perhaps too graphic for his taste? Notwithstanding this, we do find a couple of tips, here and there. In *De virt. et vit*. 101C we learn when not to use honey:

> Put a stop to your insatiate desires, and quit yourself of fears and anxieties, you are but decanting wine for a man in a fever, **offering honey to a bilious man** (καὶ χολικῷ μέλι προσφέρεις), and preparing tid-bits and dainties for sufferers from colic or dysentery, **who cannot retain them or be strengthened by them** (μὴ στέγουσι μηδὲ ῥωννυμένοις), but are only brought nearer to death thereby.

And we have a comparison in *De lib. educ*. 13D where he brings together bitter medicine with sweet juice:

> As physicians, **by mixing bitter drugs with sweet syrups** (τὰ πικρὰ τῶν φαρμάκων τοῖς γλυκέσι χυμοῖς καταμιγνύντες), have found that the agreeable taste gains access for what is beneficial, so fathers should combine the abruptness of their rebukes with mildness, and at one time grant some licence to the desires of their children, and slacken the reins a little, and then at another time draw them tight again.

While in this case there is no mention of honey, it was quite common in ancient medicine to mix honey with other drinks to soften and make any remedy more enjoyable. One of the most well-known mixtures was *oxymel*, resulting from adding honey to vinegar (Pliny, *HN* 23.2; Celsus, *Med.* 1.3).[10] Another well-known mixture was *mulsum* or *aqua mulsa*, resulting from the combination of honey and wine (Pliny, *HN* 14.4; Celsus, *Med.* 1.2–4).[11]

Wine itself was also an ambiguous substance in antiquity, at times sweet and benign, at times bitter and causing destruction.[12] Plutarch often focusses on the positive aspects of wine and thus brings honey and wine together in a number of passages (see, for instance, *Quaest. conv.* 656A, when quoting Homer [*Od*. 20.69]).

3. THE SPECIAL VALUE OF HONEY

Despite the similar characteristics that wine and honey share, honey was thought to be more ancient than wine (Hesiod, *Op.* 173; Plato, *Symp.* 203b; Porphyry, *De antr.*

[8] J. Ott, 'The Delphic bee: bees and toxic honeys as pointers to psychoactive and other medicinal plants', *Economic Botany* 2 (1998), 260–6, at 261.

[9] Cilliers and Retief (n. 1), 15.

[10] Other medicinal preparations in Fernández Uriel (n. 1), 99–104; N. Geiling, 'The science behind honey's eternal shelf life', *Smithsonian Magazine* (2013): https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-science-behind-honeys-eternal-shelf-life-1218690/ (last accessed 1 May 2025).

[11] Cilliers and Retief (n. 1), 14.

[12] S. Planchas Gallarte, 'Estudio y clasificación de los epítetos de Dioniso en la obra de Plutarco', *Bandue* 13 (2021), at 160–1.

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nymph. 7). Plutarch shares this tradition in *Quaest. conv.* 672B, when he explains the origin of certain religious rites:

> Further, the Jews use no honey in their religious services because they believe that honey spoils the wine with which it is mixed; and **they used honey as libation and in place of wine before the vine was discovered** (τοῦτ' ἦν σπονδὴ καὶ μέθυ, πρὶν ἄμπελον φανῆναι).

Greeks believed not only in its antiquity, but also in its sanctity;[13] honey was popularly believed to have rained from heaven and fallen delicately on the leaves of flowers and plants, only to be later recollected by bees.[14] Plutarch makes a passing allusion to this tradition in *Amat.* 765D, where he associates love with the divine and includes a comparison with bees and honey:

> If he [*sc.* the beloved] does not [have beauty in his thoughts], they have no more to do with him and turn to others, **like bees that abandon many fresh and charming flowers because these have no honey** (ὥσπερ αἱ μέλιτται πολλὰ τῶν χλωρῶν καὶ ἀνθηρῶν μέλι δ' οὐκ ἐχόντων ἀπολιπόντες). But wherever they catch a trace of the divine, some emanation or beguiling resemblance, they are intoxicated with joy and wonder and pay court to it, basking in the memory of ideal beauty and renewing their radiance in the presence of that genuine object of love, blessed as it is and beloved of all and worthy of all affection.

Both the antiquity and the sacredness of honey are directly tied to the sacred nature of the bee. Zeus as a baby was fed with honey by bees, a tale later transformed and rationalized by Didymus, who saw in the name of the bees a Nymph called 'Melissa'.[15] And looking closer to Plutarch's religious sphere (Delphi), the Pythia seems to have been called the Delphic Bee (Pind. *Pyth.* 4.62). Several literary references to prophetic properties are ascribed to both bees and honey.[16] So, for instance, in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (552–63) Apollo refers to three sisters, bee maidens called Thriae:

> There are certain holy ones, sisters born—three virgins gifted with wings: their heads are besprinkled with white meal, and they dwell under a ridge of Parnassus. These are teachers of divination apart from me, the art which I practised while yet a boy following herds, though my father paid no heed to it. **From their home they fly now here, now there, feeding on honey-comb** (ἐντεῦθεν δὴ ἔπειτα ποτώμεναι ἄλλοτε ἄλλη | κηρία βόσκονται) and bringing all things to pass. **And when they are inspired through eating yellow honey, they are willing to speak truth** (αἳ δ' ὅτε μὲν θυΐωσιν ἐδηδυῖαι μέλι χλωρόν, | προφρονέως ἐθέλουσιν ἀληθείην ἀγορεύειν); but if they be deprived of the gods' sweet food, then they speak falsely, as they swarm in and out together. (transl. Evelyn-White)

Plutarch is silent about the prophetic virtues of honey and bees.[17] One wonders why he does not share any of this in his extensive work, given that, as we have seen, the many

[13] Honey was linked to nectar and ambrosia as divine nourishment. Also, the bee and wax were associated with the divine; on these ideas, see Fernández Uriel (n. 1), 127–39. Plutarch refers to honey as libation in sacred rites in *Thes.* 22.5, in regard to the *Oschophoria*.

[14] See Ransome (n. 1), 134.

[15] See Ransome (n. 1), 93–4 for all the primary sources and the analysis of the tale.

[16] Also common was the allusion to great writers—Sophocles, Plato, Virgil, Lucan—having been fed with honey as a prophetic sign of their literary genius. See Ransome (n. 1), 104–5.

[17] While he discusses the oracle of Trophonius in Lebadea a number of times (*Sull.* 16–17; *De def. or.* 411F; *De genio Socr.* 590A, 592E), he is silent about the tradition, shared by Pausanias (9.39–40), according to which the hero followed a swarm of bees into a hole in the ground to consult the god, and later inquirers needed to bring honey-cakes to appease the serpents living in the cave.

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occurrences of honey and bees in his *œuvre* shows an interest in the topic as a useful tool in illustrating arguments and in comparisons. Perhaps, it felt out of place to divert the prophetic nature from the god, Apollo, or even from his receptacle, the Pythia, to lesser beings—as sacred and ancient as these might be—although it was never beyond him to record a variant tradition for the pleasure of cultural knowledge.

4. CONCLUSION

In his signature style, Plutarch resorts to honey from a wide spectrum of perspectives, alluding to previous literary and mythological traditions together with medical and natural disciplines. He thereby transmits the ancestral beliefs on the resourcefulness of honey both in the culinary and health spheres as well as the belief of its antiquity and sacredness. Whether as a topic of its own or as a passing anecdote, honey seems to be an accommodating theme for our author.

He resorts to honey to highlight the contraposition between sweet and bitter, as a helpful image to understand the paradoxes of life (*Quaest. conv.*, *Adv. Col., De ad. et am.*). Plutarch emphasizes the complexity of the nature of honey, which traditionally had been associated with the idea of sweetness alone. Its best quality depends on the roughest plant (*De aud.*), again a play on opposites; yet some varieties of honey turn out to be bitter, if not worse. The stingy, sour touch is best apparent in its medical use or when fermented and mixed with vinegar or wine, as in *oxymel* and *mulsum*. Nevertheless, we still see these rooted in the most ancient traditions, deeply associated with the idea of sweetness and usefulness.

While honey is attached to the idea of antiquity and sacredness (*Quaest. conv.*, *Amat.*), its connection to the prophetic nature of Apollo and Delphi is not present in Plutarch. Too close a connection with the divine could overcome that bitter, medical aspect of honey, something needed in the human realm but impossible to associate with the divine in Plutarch's thought. Only in the human sphere could we get the paradoxical combination of (sweet) divine and (bitter) human attributes.

The contrasting essence of honey, playful combination of sweet and bitter, is what interests Plutarch most. In most of the passages where honey is mentioned, it has both properties, and its beneficial character stems from this antithetic nature. It comes as no surprise, given that Plutarch's style is a reflection of his vision of the world, that he would privilege the idea of honey as a counterbalance of opposites: a touch of bitterness to enhance the sweetness of life.

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