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## Reading Karen Blixen's "Babette's Feast"

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Karen Blixen (known as Isak Dinesen in America) wrote tales which have been described as puzzles, labyrinths, and multi-layered texts, which bring forth new perspectives upon each re-reading. Blixen approved of imaginative readers, who could participate in creating the meaning of the text and included "blank pages" in her stories, moments where the narrator falls silent and the reader's imagination is expected to fill the gap. A number of narrative devices (tales within tales, unreliable narrators, etc.) are deployed in her stories, which undermine narrative authority, again nudging readers to figure out things for themselves. A fan once wrote to Blixen, asking what she meant by her story "The Monkey" from *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934). Blixen expressed discomfort with the question "What does it mean?", but nevertheless shared some of her thoughts about her own tale, concluding: "This is not a good explanation, but you are free to come up with a better one."<sup>1</sup> So, with the author's sanction, readers of Blixen's tales are free to come up with whatever interpretation they please. Few of her tales have been subject to as many varied, and even contradictory readings, as "Babette's Feast."

Judith Thurman tells an amusing story about the genesis of "Babette's Feast." A friend bet Dinesen that she could not write a story that would be acceptable to *The Saturday Evening Post*. Dinesen took the bet and inquired about the requirements for the market: "Write about food...Americans are obsessed with food."<sup>2</sup> "Babette's Feast" was duly written, but later rejected by *The Saturday Evening Post*, which took instead another tale which Dinesen did not esteem as highly, "Uncle Seneca," retitled "The Uncertain Heiress." The tale was further rejected by *Good Housekeeping*, which expressed the concern that the tale would only interest "those in the upper income brackets."<sup>3</sup> "Babette's Feast" finally found a home in *The Ladies' Home Journal*. It eventually appeared as one of the five tales in *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), which Blixen characterized thus: "This is played on a lighter instrument... You might say it was played on a flute, where the others were played on a violin or cello."<sup>4</sup> To her American publisher, Robert Haas, she wrote of these tales: "[T]hey are not to be taken too seriously."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frans Lasson and Tom Engelbrecht, eds *Karen Blixen i Danmark: Breve, 1931-1962*. Vol. 2. (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1996), 433.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Thurman, *Isak Dinesen: The Life of a Storyteller* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 329.

<sup>3</sup> Thurman, 330.

<sup>4</sup> Curtis Cate, "Isak Dinesen: The Scheherazade of Our Times," *The Cornhill*, 171 (Winter 1959/60): 127.

<sup>5</sup> Lasson and Engelbrecht, 160.

“Babette’s Feast” is quite likely Blixen’s best-known tale, largely thanks to Gabriel Axel’s Oscar-winning film from 1987, which is based on the story. The movie has gotten a recent flurry of attention because Pope Francis said in an interview from 2016 that it was his favorite film. It even received mention in the Pope’s *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love):

The most intense joys in life arise when we are able to elicit joy in others, as a foretaste of heaven. We can think of the lovely scene in the film *Babette’s Feast*, when the generous cook receives a grateful hug and praise: ‘Ah, how you will delight the angels!’ It is a joy and a great consolation to bring delight to others, to see them enjoying themselves. This joy, the fruit of fraternal love, is not that of the vain and self-centred, but of lovers who delight in the good of those whom they love, who give freely to them and thus bear good fruit.<sup>6</sup>

One can surmise that Blixen would have been delighted by such an illustrious member of her audience, especially given her fascination with the aesthetic aspects of the Catholic church, manifested by, among other things, her characters Cardinal Hamilcar von Sehestedt (“The Deluge at Norderney”) and Cardinal Salviati (“The Tales of Albondocani”). Christian or religious readings of the tale have existed since shortly after the appearance of “Babette’s Feast” in *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), and especially flourished after the release of Axel’s film.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Amoris Laetitia*, 129. See also: Philip Koslowski, “Why does the Pope want us to watch the movie ‘Babette’s Feast’?” *Aleteia*. <https://aleteia.org/2016/11/21/why-does-pope-francis-want-us-to-watch-the-movie-babettes-feast/>

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Ann Gossman, “Sacramental Imagery in Two Stories by Isak Dinesen,” *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 4.3 (Autumn 1963): 325; Mary Elizabeth Podles, “Babette’s Feast: Feasting with Lutherans,” *The Antioch Review*, 50:3 (1992), 551–65; Maire Mullins, “Home, Community, and the Gift that Gives in Isak Dinesen’s Babette’s Feast,” *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 23:3 (1994), 217–28; Jean Schuler, “Kierkegaard at Babette’s Feast: The Return to the Finite,” *Journal of Religion & Film*, 1:2 (1997), Article 3; Wendy M. Wright, “Babette’s Feast: A Religious Film,” *Journal of Religion & Film*, 1:2 (1997), Article 2; Ervin Beck. “Dinesen’s ‘Babette’s Feast.’” *The Explicator*. 54:4 (1998), 210-12; Clive Marsh, “Did You Say ‘Grace’?: Eating in Community in Babette’s Feast,” in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, edited by Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz (Malden: Blackwell, 1997); Edward McNulty, “Babette’s Extravagant Love,” in *Christianity and the Arts*, 6 (Spring 1999); Bryan Stone, “The Communion of Saints: Babette’s Feast,” in *Faith and Film: Theological Themes at the Cinema* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2000); Ron Hansen, *A Stay Against Confusion: Essays on Faith and Fiction* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001); Wanda Avila, “The Discovery of Meaning in Babette’s Feast,” *Reflections on Psychology, Culture and Life. The Jung Page*. 2005. <http://www.cgjungpage.org/learn/articles/film-reviews/710-the-discovery-of-meaning-in-babettes-feastq>; Maire Mullins, “‘Deeper Down in the Domain of Human Hearts’: Hope in Isak Dinesen’s Babette’s Feast,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 12:1 (Winter 2009), 16-37; Thomas J. Curry, “Babette’s Feast and the Goodness of God,” *Journal of Religion & Film*, 16: 2 (2012), Article 10.

As such a proliferation of religious readings might indicate, a religious interpretation is indeed easy to support in Blixen's text. It is a story of a French woman, who flees the Paris Commune and takes refuge in Norway with two maiden sisters, Martine and Philippa, who lead an aging flock of pious Lutherans who were followers of their late father, the Dean. As young women, Martine and Philippa each had an encounter with the outside world. Martine caught the eye of Lorens Loewenhielm, a n'er-do-well officer from Sweden, who has been sent by his family to an old relative so he can reflect over his bad behavior. Young Lorens feels awkward and insignificant amongst this small group of believers, and leaves in defeat, vowing to make a name for himself in the great world. Philippa is heard singing in church by Achille Papin, a famous opera singer from France, who immediately offers to give Philippa singing lessons. After rehearsing the seduction duet from *Don Giovanni*, Papin places a chaste kiss upon Philippa's brow, which is disturbing enough to the young woman that she stops her singing lessons. Many years later, fleeing violence in Paris, Babette appears at the doorstep of Martine and Philippa, bearing a letter of introduction from Achille Papin, with the laconic information that Babette can cook. Babette works for the sisters without wages as a maid, cooking split cod and ale-and-bread soup and preparing soup pails for the poor. When Babette learns that she has won 10,000 francs in the French lottery, she requests of the sisters that she be allowed to prepare a real French dinner in honor of the Dean's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. The feast takes place and General Lorens Loewenhielm reappears as a surprise guest. Fearing the strangeness of the dishes they are going to be served, the Dean's followers have all resolved not to say a word about the food or drink during the meal. General Loewenhielm is astounded by the fare which reminds him of an exquisite dinner he enjoyed in Paris at the Café Anglais. When the meal is over, Babette tells Martine and Philippa that she used to be the chef of the Café Anglais in Paris, and she has spent the entire 10,000 francs on this one dinner, in order that she, as an artist, might once more do her utmost.

Several of the religious readings of "Babette's Feast" see "Babette's relationship to the puritanical community as allegorical to Christ's actions on behalf of the church and her feast a kind of Eucharist."<sup>8</sup> There is ample evidence in the text for such an argument. As Ervin Beck enumerates:

Many details contribute to seeing Babette's feast as a commemoration of the Last Supper: The meal is served to twelve people; the meal commemorates the death of the founder of a religious sect; it is set on a Sunday in the Advent season; and Dinesen several times quotes Psalm 85:10, which is a traditional reading during Advent, since it prophesies the way the Incarnation will reconcile the rival claims of justice and mercy and of the old and new dispensations: Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss have kissed each other.<sup>9</sup>

Beck goes even further to suggest that Babette can be associated with St. Barbara, whose attributes are the sacramental cup and wafer, because of her connection to the sacrament, and her last name, Hersant, can be translated as "herself a saint."<sup>10</sup>

There seems a clear contrast, however, between the religious views of the devout

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<sup>8</sup> Curry, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Beck, 212.

<sup>10</sup> Beck, 210-11.

Lutheran sect and the Catholicism represented by Babette. Grethe Røstboll characterizes it as a contrast between “cold, pietistic Norway and sensuous, temperamental Paris, between an ascetic Protestant world view and Catholic extravagance and worship of beauty.”<sup>11</sup> Ann Gossman speaks of “two irreconcilable points of view toward food and drink are played off: the strict Puritanical rejection of any enjoyment of them as luxuries, and the Epicurean enjoyment of them for their intrinsic delight.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, despite the apparent irreconcilable differences represented by these contrasting world views, the feast achieves a reconciliation of these poles. Several critics have seen this story as an answer to Blixen’s old nemesis, Søren Kierkegaard: “With Søren Kierkegaard, Karen Blixen argues against the either/or proposition that there is only one correct way to live one’s life, that we are faced with a series of critical choices and if we choose wrongly we are lost.”<sup>13</sup> General Loewenhielm’s speech at the end of the meal is nothing less than a sermon on Grace:

Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude. Grace, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! that which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another!<sup>14</sup>

Babette’s sacramental/sacrificial meal results in hope regained and losses being restored.<sup>15</sup> Let us not forget that the Pope himself sees the feast as an exemplary act of Christian generosity.

Many, though not all, of those who support the religious reading of the text have some sort of religious training in their background that makes Blixen’s religious references and allusions particularly resonate. Several Blixen scholars, on the other hand, have performed what might be termed a demonic reading of the text.<sup>16</sup> The term “demonic” here is another wink to

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<sup>11</sup> Grethe Røstboll, *Længslens vingeslag* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1996), 278-9.

<sup>12</sup> Gossman, 323.

<sup>13</sup> Ron Hansen, 147. See also Duncan, 140: “Babette’s Feast is about incarnation and about both/and transcending either/or. The aesthetic, as the realm of the appearance of the lovely, is not simply opposed to the religious or for that matter to the ethical.”

<sup>14</sup> Isak Dinesen, “Babette’s Feast,” in *Anecdotes of Destiny* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 52.

<sup>15</sup> Mullins, 23.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example: Robert Langbaum, *Isak Dinesen’s Art: the Gayety of Vision* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Sara Stambaugh, *The Witch and the Goddess in the Stories of Isak Dinesen* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988); Susan Hardy Aiken, *Isak Dinesen and the Engendering of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Frantz Leander Hansen, *Babette og det aristokratiske univers* (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag, 1998); Charlotte Engberg, *Billedets ekko: Om Karen Blixens fortællinger* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2000); Susan C. Brantly, *Understanding Isak Dinesen* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2002); and Frantz Leander Hansen, *The Aristocratic Universe of Karen Blixen. Destiny and the Denial of Fate*, translated by Gaye Kynoch (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2003).

Blixen's countryman, Søren Kierkegaard, who sees it as an aesthetic, artistic category. Using the word "diabolical," Frantz Leander Hansen describes the concept as follows: "[T]he diabolical is in a positive sense the unexpected, surprising and unpredictable which ensures that life does not stagnate in well-regulated and routine rationalization. In Karen Blixen's universe the diabolical is principally a creative, constructive factor, and therefore it makes sense that the artist Babette should be in collusion with the devil and with his help creates her divine meal."<sup>17</sup> Blixen had a strong fascination for the figure of the witch, which Susan Hardy Aiken has described as "a figure of subversive female potency and creativity whose craft was analogous to that of the woman writer."<sup>18</sup> In Blixen's tales, the witch is a positive, powerful representation of female creativity.

Babette is a great culinary artist who is referred to as a witch and her feast is a "witches' sabbath."<sup>19</sup> Her kitchen has a three-legged chair, where she sits as "a Pythia on her tripod."<sup>20</sup> When Babette suddenly wins 10,000 francs in the lottery, it is felt by the inhabitants of Berlevaag to be an "ungodly" affair, and Babette seems in possession of a "magic carpet."<sup>21</sup> As the time for the celebratory meal approaches, Babette is like "the bottled demon of the fairy tale."<sup>22</sup> Babette and her red-haired helper are "like some witch with her familiar spirit."<sup>23</sup> An inverted Last Supper, there are twelve guests at the dinner, with Babette making up the thirteenth in the kitchen, and Sara Stambaugh has pointed out that thirteen is the number of a witches' coven.<sup>24</sup> The Last Supper is, of course, the source of the Christian sacrament of communion in which the body and blood of Christ are ritualistically consumed. When the sisters learn that Babette has spent all of her money on one dinner, Martine's thoughts go to an African chief who served up his grandchild as a meal in gratitude to a white Christian missionary; thus, the meal is a form of cannibalism, rather than a religious sacrament, or perhaps the religious sacrament is a form of ritual cannibalism. Charlotte Engberg has cleverly noted that the meal constitutes an inversion of another Christian event, the wedding at Cana: It is not a matter of water being turned into wine, but wine being consumed as if it were water.<sup>25</sup>

Most of these "demonic" readings conclude that the meal is not necessarily a generous gift to the unwitting puritans of Berlevaag, but the last opportunity for a great artist to practice her art. Indeed, there is little evidence that the meal will have a lasting impact on the participants, and were it not for the more worldly Lorens Loewenhielm, they would probably not know or appreciate what had transpired. Babette's revelations once the meal is over only seem to confuse Martine and Philippa, who simply do not have the same frame of reference. Babette states that she has not sacrificed all that she had for the sake of the sisters, but for her own sake. The best that Philippa can do is to borrow the words of another artist, Achille Papin, in an attempt to comfort Babette with a promise of appreciation in paradise.

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<sup>17</sup> Hansen (2005), 74-5.

<sup>18</sup> Aiken, 80. See also Brantly, 9-11, for more on female "types," such as the witch, in Blixen's work.

<sup>19</sup> Dinesen, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Dinesen, 33.

<sup>21</sup> Dinesen, 36, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Dinesen, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Dinesen, 42.

<sup>24</sup> Stambaugh, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Engberg, 227.

Related to, and occasionally overlapping with, these “demonic” readings of “Babette’s Feast,” are readings that focus on the text as an example of feminist art.<sup>26</sup> Ieva Steponavičiūtė claims that “Babette’s Feast” is “a meta-narrative about art and its engendering.”<sup>27</sup> Marleen Barr concurs with Steponavičiūtė that the tale is not meant to be a realistic tale of life in rural Norway, but rather, the amazing coincidences in the text (winning the lottery, Lorens Loewenhielm turning up unexpectedly, etc.) make the tale fantastic. Because of this fantastic element in Blixen’s tales, Barr is willing to declare Blixen something of a matriarch of contemporary postmodern feminist fabulation: “Dinesen’s presentation of the female artist juxtaposes feminism with the fantastic and establishes her as a modernist literary mother who engenders fabulative postmodern daughters.”<sup>28</sup> According to Barr, “Babette is a magical alien who soon becomes an integral part of the sisters’ familial female community.”<sup>29</sup> Both Barr and Sarah Webster Goodwin agree that Berlevaag is a feminist utopia, of sorts. According to Barr’s reading, “Babette uses the money in a feminist manner. She literally nourishes the community when she creates her feast, a work of art which at once celebrates her substantial talents and serves the needs of the group.”<sup>30</sup> As a slight twist on this conclusion, Stambaugh argues that the feminine values of the French cook Babette triumph over the masculine values of the Norwegian puritans.<sup>31</sup>

James M. Ogier looks at the theme of silence (a female category) and speech (a male instrument of domination) in “Babette’s Feast” and allows himself to be inspired by Aiken’s words: “Through the art of ‘story-telling women’ the haunting, barbaric discourse of the wild space may find a voice, may become comprehensible or legible, so that finally, impossibly, scandalously, ‘silence will speak’”<sup>32</sup> Ogier is able to present quite a catalogue of characters who seem robbed of speech. Lorens Loewenhielm fails to win Martine, in part, because “he could find nothing at all to say, and no inspiration in the glass of water before him.”<sup>33</sup> As he leaves, “tender words stuck in his throat” and he feels “dumb despair.”<sup>34</sup> Loewenhielm’s future career is made by parroting the pious phrases he learned in Berlevaag, speech empty of meaning. Martine

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example: Stambaugh (1988); Aiken (1990); Marleen Barr, “Food for Postmodern Thought: Isak Dinesen’s Female Artists as Precursors to Contemporary Feminist Fabulators” in *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, edited by Libby Falk Jones and Sarah Webster Goodwin (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1990), 21-33; Sarah Webster Goodwin, “Knowing Better: Feminism and Utopian Discourse in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Villette*, and ‘Babette’s Feast,’” in *Feminism, Utopia, and Narrative*, edited by Libby Falk Jones and Sarah Webster Goodwin (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1990), 1–20; James M. Ogier, “Babette’s Verbal Feast: Therapeutic Orality in Text, Translation and Film,” *Scandinavica*, 32:2 (1993); and Ieva Steponavičiūtė, *Texts at Play. The Ludic Aspect of Karen Blixen’s Writings* (Vilnius University, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Steponavičiūtė, 170.

<sup>28</sup> Barr, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Barr, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Barr, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Stambaugh, 79-81.

<sup>32</sup> Aiken, 82; Ogier, 177. David J. Mickelsen also deals with the theme of silence and speech in “After-dinner Speakers in ‘Babette’s Feast’: in the end was the word,” *Edda* 1:1 (2001), 33-57.

<sup>33</sup> Dinesen, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Dinesen, 24.

changes the subject when later Lorens is mentioned, and with regard to Phillipa's Achille Papin, "they lacked the words with which to discuss him."<sup>35</sup> Babette herself is silenced as a French speaker arriving in a town of Norwegian speakers. She allows Achille Papin's letter to speak for her. The sisters and Babette do not discuss Babette's past or try to convert her: "They silently agreed that the example of a good Lutheran life would be the best means of converting their servant."<sup>36</sup> Of course, the pious flock deals with its fear of the impending feast by agreeing to not say a word about either food or drink. The references to speech acts are legion in the tale, and not exhausted by the examples given above.

Ogier further uncovers an ingenious pun embedded in the Danish text of the tale, surrounding the Danish word "måltid," which means both speech (language) and meal. As he explains, "As a result, Babette's *måltid* becomes both a 'meal-time' and a 'speech-time', an enabling act in the realm of verbal communication. This communion of communication is clearly what the community is most in need of, since it has fallen into bickering and brooding silence."<sup>37</sup> Babette's meal breaks the silence of the community, which was nursing its grudges, of Martine and Phillipa, who might begin to see a possibility for self-expression, and of Babette herself, who now proudly claims for herself the title of artist.

Using a psychoanalytic approach, Esther Rashkin has performed a highly informative reading of "Babette's Feast" as a tale about coming to terms with loss and initiating a process of mourning.<sup>38</sup> Rashkin observes that the first five of the twelve short chapters of "Babette's Feast" recount a series of losses, which are, in turn, associated with an inability or refusal to speak: Lorens' loss of Martine (and vice versa), Philippa's loss of Papin and an artistic career, Babette's loss of her home, her husband, and her son. Babette's meal is able to loosen everyone's tongues about their losses, which is the first step toward beginning the process of mourning. There is a link between introjection and indigestion. (Lorens is said to suffer from indigestion, which seems to be cured by the feast.) Babette's losses have been particularly traumatic. Not only has she lost her family and home, but she has also lost her audience as an artist. Even worse, General Galliffet, who was among her foremost admirers, was also the one who ordered her husband and son to be shot. As Rashkin explains:

To mourn her husband and son would mean recognizing that the society for which she lived and that gave her life as an artist was oppressive and murderous. To mourn the loss of this society and of her position as a culinary genius within it would be to express her love for those who murdered her husband and son and wronged the poor. Caught in an impossible double bind, Babette's solution during her twelve years in Berlevaag is to mourn no one, to exclude from language any expression of her loss and suffering.<sup>39</sup>

The commemoration dinner for the deceased Dean, the "real French dinner," becomes the occasion for her to begin mourning her losses in France.

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<sup>35</sup> Dinesen, 28.

<sup>36</sup> Dinesen, 31-2.

<sup>37</sup> Ogier, 183.

<sup>38</sup> Esther Rashkin, "A Recipe for Mourning: Isak Dinesen's 'Babette's Feast,'" *Style* 29:3 (1995), 356-74.

<sup>39</sup> Rashkin, 362.



Rashkin notes that the menu itself continues the death theme. Babette's famous *Cailles en Sarcophage* (Quails in Sarcophagi) is a suitable and symbolic main course. The phrase "ma petite caille" (which occurs in the movie, but not in the text) means, in French, "my beloved, my darling, or my dearest."<sup>40</sup> So, Rashkin argues, "The quails Babette brings from France, kills, and then meticulously entombs in their sarcophagi are not just birds, but her loved ones."<sup>41</sup> In a similar fashion, the choice of the champagne, Veuve Clicquot, is an oblique reference to Babette's widowed state, since the brand name means "the Widow Clicquot." Rashkin takes exception to some of the other readings of the meal we have seen: "Babette's sumptuous re-creation of a dinner for twelve at the Café Anglais does not have as its principal goal allowing her to practice her art one last time or to reaffirm her identity as an artist in a gesture of nostalgic self-sacrifice or self-annihilation. This re-creation is the means by which she finally buries 'France' and begins her new life in Norway. It is not an act of selflessness, but of self-rescue and self-preservation. It is an act of survival."<sup>42</sup> As a result of this therapeutic meal, Rashkin can envision a positive future in Norway for Babette.

Others have seen in the pages of "Babette's Feast" a class war.<sup>43</sup> Babette has, after all, been a *Pétroleuse* on the barricades of the Paris Commune, fighting for the cause of the poor against the aristocrats for whom she cooked. Frantz Leander Hansen sees Babette as "blatantly exploited" by Martine and Philippa.<sup>44</sup> She is not paid wages, and when Babette wins the lottery, the sisters' first thought, made much more explicit in the Danish version, is that they will have to start making their own split cod and ale-and-bread soup.<sup>45</sup> Babette is instructed to serve the sisters only plain food, since it is the food for the poor that is most important. Under Babette's reign in the kitchen, "the soup-pails and baskets acquired a new, mysterious power to stimulate and strengthen their poor and sick."<sup>46</sup> It is amusing to imagine that this means that Babette has secretly been exercising her culinary artistry all along to benefit the poor, while the sisters have been eating their tasteless slop. Babette is granted the favor of cooking her real French dinner, because she accurately points out to Martine and Philippa that she has never asked anything of them before. Shapiro refers to this as evoking "a balance sheet," thus, continuing the economic imagery that Shapiro has noted in the tale.<sup>47</sup> Instead of reconciliation, Hansen sees the feast as an act of rebellion. Hansen notes that in the Danish version of the text a war metaphor is employed when Babette states that she spent everything for her own sake, and not for theirs: "Babette's eyes met Philippa's like a pair of heavy canons drawn into position."<sup>48</sup> The fact that when Philippa embraces Babette at the end of the story, Babette is stiff like "a marble monument," is

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<sup>40</sup> Rashkin, 363.

<sup>41</sup> Rashkin, 363. Blixen was perfectly fluent in French, so the association is not such a stretch.

<sup>42</sup> Rashkin, 365.

<sup>43</sup> See in particular Frantz Leander Hansen (2003) and Michael J. Shapiro, "Political Economy and Mimetic Desire: A Postmodernist Reading of 'Babette's Feast,'" *History of European Ideas* 13:3 (1991), 239-51.

<sup>44</sup> Hansen (2003), 71.

<sup>45</sup> Hansen (2003), 71.

<sup>46</sup> Dinesen, 32.

<sup>47</sup> Shapiro, 247.

<sup>48</sup> Hansen (2003), 94.



seen as evidence by Hansen that there has been no reconciliation, and instead, the feast is a memorial monument over Babette's career as an artist, which is now at an end.<sup>49</sup>

Each reader tends to interpret this multi-layered story according to their own backgrounds or the concerns of their generation, so perhaps one might suggest a reading of the story, inspired by current headlines: "Babette's Feast" is also a tale about being a political refugee. Babette has been forced to leave behind everything familiar and dear to her because of an armed conflict. Her flight has been perilous, exhausting, and traumatic. She has lost everything. She finds herself in a strange culture without a command of the language. Although she is highly skilled and educated as a chef, the country that receives her has no need of her gifts and cannot fully appreciate them anyway. How many doctors, lawyers, and skilled professionals have been forced to take up manual labor in recent years? Babette's love of her native land and culture conflicts with her perception that that same culture is politically unjust, and downright unsafe for ordinary people. She cannot go back, even when the opportunity presents itself. Her adopted country, however, sees her as strange and foreign. She is not one of them. Her only recourse is to work hard and survive. When, by chance, she is able to revisit the life she fled, it is both a temporary triumph and a final farewell. She will continue as a stranger in a strange land.

Depending on the reader, "Babette's Feast" is either a comedy or a tragedy, and perhaps both. The mismatch between the greater world and the provincial Norwegian town is filled with comic potential. Pitting naiveté and sophistication against one another is a classic tool of comedy. As Tone Selboe has written about the dinner, "Berlevaag's naive inhabitants behave in a worldly fashion, while the man of the world cannot conceal his surprise. Naiveté seems urbane, while urbanity becomes naive."<sup>50</sup> The feast itself can be read as a transcendent, therapeutic, reconciling moment, in which all conflicts become resolved and participants enjoy a both/and situation rather than either/or. Along these lines, the meal impacts the cook and diners alike in a positive fashion, and we have the proverbial happy ending. On the other hand, Babette's life story certainly can be seen as tragic, because of the trauma and loss she has experienced. She has been forced to rebel against the aristocrats who were her special audience: there can be no reconciliation. The reward in heaven that Philippa predicts for Babette is merely an illusion. Her life on earth will be plain and bereft of the things that give it value. Similarly, Martine and Philippa's destinies can be seen as tragic. They had the potential to become a beloved mother and wife and a famous opera diva, but instead they achieved nothing at all. Their entire lives have been a sacrifice to the memory of their father, whose sect is in the process of dying out. From this perspective, the ending is not happy in the least. "Babette's Feast" contains all of this potential; it is simply for the reader to decide which reading appeals the most. For a story that its author characterized as "lighter" and "not to be taken too seriously," "Babette's Feast" has proven to possess rich and unexpected depths, which are perhaps, even still, not yet completely fathomed.

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<sup>49</sup> Hansen (2003), 96.

<sup>50</sup> Tone Selboe, *Kunst & Erfaring: En Studie i Karen Blixens Forfatterskap* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1996), 117.