In the European intellectual tradition, few authors have had an influence and popularity as long-lasting as Plutarch. His *Moralia* and his *Parallel Lives*, written in the first century AD, were endlessly reprinted, translated and re-translated. Since the Renaissance, Plutarch’s writings were, next to the Bible, the pre-eminent source of moral examples. They defined what outstanding moral behaviour was and showed how to achieve it. Above all, Plutarch was a school author. He was read at an early age. In his *Confessions*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau remembered the excitement with which he, as a child, followed the actions of the great men, until he knew long passages by heart.¹ Many of Plutarch’s stories became part of the common culture. Every educated person could be expected to know them. Only in the course of the nineteenth century, when classical morality began to play a less important role in public life, and when the centre of interest shifted to historical explanations, his reputation began to decline. It is no coincidence that Friedrich Nietzsche, in his diatribe against the rise of historicism, in 1874 still admonished his readers: “Nurture your souls on Plutarch, and dare to believe in yourself, while you believe in his heroes.”²

Plutarch’s biographies describe kings and generals, aristocrats and democrats, but his writings are more particularly associated with what is now known as classical republicanism. As a Greek author living in the first century of the Roman Empire, he showed a distinct strain of nostalgia for earlier, supposedly more straightforward ages. He praised the exploits of Alexander, but he clearly felt more sympathy and respect for the Roman republic, for Athenian democracy and for Spartan equality.³ His insistence on *historia vitae magistra*,

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³ This point was not lost on Rousseau: “De ces interessantes lectures [...] se forma cet esprit libre et républicain [...] qui m’a tourmenté tout le temps de ma vie” (“Out of these interesting
on history as the teacher of life, made his work not only influential in education, but also in the theatre and in the visual arts. Every time art theorists and patrons tried to enlarge the scope of history painting, they referred to Plutarch. “Only Plutarch can provide subjects worthy of the brushes of every painter in Europe,” declared La Font de Saint Yenne in 1754, in one of his comments on the present state of the visual arts in France.² More than half a century later, the best advice Jacques-Louis David could give to a pupil looking for an appropriate subject still was: “Leaf through your Plutarch.” With David, the republican tendencies in his classicism were obvious. But does this mean that subjects taken from Plutarch always carry republican connotations, and therefore should be seen as signs of opposition towards the ancien régime? Was it possible at all to transfer controversial political ideas into painting?

In this chapter, I will take a look at some scenes derived from Plutarch, both in Dutch and in French art. I limit myself to subjects related to Sparta. In early modern times, Plutarch was the almost exclusive source of knowledge about ancient Sparta. Praise for Spartan institutions has always been regarded as belonging to the more radical manifestations of classical republicanism. It played a prominent part in the ideology of the Jacobins during the French Revolution, with whom David was closely associated. It seems an interesting test-case to see in how far these radical aspects were reflected in the visual arts. Is “Sparta” in painting loaded with the same connotations as it is in political thought, or did the arts serve a different function?

Spartan Myths

Plutarch described the organisation of Spartan society in detail in his Lycurgus, on the life of the legendary lawgiver and founder of the classical Spartan state. Some of this material is briefly referred to in his lives of two Spartan military leaders, Lysander and Agesilaus. He discussed Spartan institutions again in his Agis and Cleomenes, the lives of the two Spartan kings who in the third century
