

Plato, Plutarch, and John: Three Symposia about Love

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The Fourth Gospel's account of the final meal of Jesus with his disciples has, like the rest of the Gospel, generated a vast scholarly literature. Much of that has been focused on the possible literary history of John 13–17 and the stages in the development of the Johannine community that might be traced in those chapters.² The more recent trend in the scholarly treatment of these chapters has been to focus on the final product of whatever source and redactional process may have been at work behind the text.³ Even those who once were attracted to redactional explanations of the text have found an “integrative” approach helpful.⁴

¹ Versions of this paper were originally presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2011, and as a lecture at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia in December 2012. I am grateful to colleagues in each venue who offered helpful comments. I am happy to offer this essay as a tribute to Elaine Pagels, a colleague who has made significant contributions to the study of the varieties of early Christian belief and practice and who is very much aware of the subtle ways in which texts work.

² For some of the attempts to find the sources of these chapters, see John L. Boyle, “The Last Discourse (Jn 13,31–16,33) and Prayer (Jn 17): Some Observations on their Unity and Development,” *Biblica* 56 (1975): 210–22; John Painter, “Glimpses of the Johannine Community in the Farewell Discourses,” *ABR* 28 (1980): 21–38. See Fernando Segovia, *Love Relationships in the Johannine Tradition* (SBLDS 58; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1982), 82: “Nowadays hardly any exegete would vigorously maintain that John 13:31–18:1 constitutes a literary unity as it stands.” Most recently, see Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (3 vols.; Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

³ See George Johnston, *The Spirit Paraclete in the Gospel of John* (SNTSMS 12; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). While allowing for redaction, he comments on the overall structure of the chapters. See also Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., “The Structure and Message of John 13:1–38,” *ABR* 34 (1986): 1–16.

⁴ For instance, Hartwig Thyen, in his commentary, *Das Johannesevangelium* (HNT 6; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) rejects redaction-critical explanations for the complexity of the text of the Gospel, while drawing on their observations to illuminate the literary dynamics of the text. When he comes to the last supper discourses, he cites Fernando Segovia, in a work later than that mentioned in the previous note, *The Farewell of the Word: The Johannine Call to Abide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), viii, in defense of an

Along with the attempts to attend to the coherence of the final composition or redaction of the Gospel, there has been considerable attention to the generic affinities of these chapters. The intertexts that have been brought into play in exploring that issue have included testaments,⁵ consolation literature, and Greek drama.⁶ These and, no doubt, other genres can be adduced to illuminate the moves made in this portion of the Gospel. The Gospel, in fact, playfully exploits the conventions of numerous literary forms in order to engage its readers/hearers in new and challenging ways.⁷ Hence the presence of features from a variety of literary genres should not be surprising. It is always worthwhile to explore how such features work in the new combinations that this Gospel achieves.

In addition to testamentary, consolatory, and dramatic literature, some interpreters of the Last Supper discourses have occasionally, and usually *en passant*, found elements in the account reminiscent of ancient “symposia.” A recent, and typically casual example, comes from a work on the Gospels and early Christian liturgy by Gordon Lathrop. Prof. Lathrop, in this treatment of the origins of Christian ritual practice, made an offhand reference to the Last Supper as a Symposium.⁸ This paper will test the hypothesis that there may indeed be some relationship to Greek symposiast literature.

What literature is in view? From the fourth century BCE to late antiquity there was, as recent literature on the topic has suggested, a relatively stable social practice of formal banqueting. The conventions of such banqueting have been fruitfully explored for their relevance to early Christian

“integrative” approach to the text, accompanied by a reticence about determining *the* meaning of a text.

⁵ The comparison of these chapters to testamentary literature is, in some ways the most traditional generic designation. See, of course, Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus According to John 17* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966; trans. of *Jesu Letzter Wille nach Johannes 17* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1966; 3d. ed., 1971]). Traditional intertexts used for developing this comparison are the Jewish *Testaments*, of the Twelve, of Job, of Adam, etc.

⁶ For the relevance of both “consolation” literature and ancient dramatic conventions, see George Parsenios, *Departure and Consolation: The Johannine Farewell Discourses in Light of Greco-Roman Literature* (NovTSup 117; Leiden: Brill, 2005). Parsenios’ monograph is especially illuminating in noting the parallels in ancient drama to some of the features of the discourses that have been taken to be markers of redactional activity, such as the “delayed departure” of Jesus at 14:31.

⁷ For my suggestions about the technique, see Attridge, “Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel,” *JBL* (2002) 1–27, reprinted in Attridge, *Essays in John and Hebrews* (WUNT 264; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

⁸ Gordon Lathrop, *The Four Gospels on Sunday* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 41.

dining practices.⁹ Alongside the social practice there was also a literary tradition of describing banquets and the conversations that took place in them. It is this literary heritage that may be relevant to the Fourth Gospel. The tradition begins in Classical Athens with the *Symposia* of Plato and Xenophon, and it continues through late antiquity with the *Banquet* of Methodius of Olympus. Between those temporal bookends, with very different attitudes toward a frequent theme of symposia, love, stand other literary works. Petronius's *Satyricon* anchors the carnivalesque end of the spectrum, while various writings of Plutarch anchor the more serious, philosophical form of the genre. Plutarch's symposia include the *Quaestiones convivales*, the *Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*,¹⁰ and a text that will be particularly interesting for us because of its explicit subject matter, the *Amatorius*. Other examples in this spectrum would include the *Letter of Aristeeas*, or at least the last third of that letter, with its accounts of the banquets of the sage Jewish translators of the Bible, who attempt to convince their Ptolemaic patron of the wisdom of their curious text. The genre of descriptions of formal dinners obviously has a broad range and not all examples will be relevant to this experiment. What may be germane to an exploration of the Fourth Gospel are some of those symposia that deal with the theme of love. I focus for convenience on Plato and Plutarch.

Why suspect that there might be some connection with this literature in the first place? Apart from the very generic similarities that John and symposiast literature both involve dining and, perhaps, moderate drinking, is there anything else that might indicate some connections to be pursued? The first indication that something is afoot is to be found in the initial setting of the dinner discourse in the Fourth Gospel, in what appear to be relatively minor narrative touches. These are, nonetheless, suggestive gestures toward the genre that may be at play.

⁹ For the basic typology see Matthias Klinghardt, *Gemeinschaftsmahl und Mahlgesellschaft. Soziologie und liturgie frühchristlicher Mahlfeiern* (TANZ 13; Tübingen, Basel: Francke Verlag, 1996); Hal Taussig, *Many Tables: The Eucharist in the New Testament and Liturgy Today* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990); Taussig, *In the Beginning Was the Meal: Social Experimentation and Early Christian Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); Kathleen Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993); and Corley, *Maranatha: Women's Funerary Rituals and Christian Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010). For an attempt to find symposiast connections with another text of the New Testament, see Peter-Ben Smit, "A Symposiastic Background to James?" *NTS* 58 (2012): 105–122.

¹⁰ David Aune, "Septem Sapientium Convivium (Moralia 146B–164D)," in *Plutarch's Ethical Writings and Early Christian Literature* (ed. Hans Dieter Betz; SCHNT 4; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 51–105.

To illustrate the point it is instructive to note what a recent commentator, Craig Keener, sees in the Fourth Gospel's account of the Last Supper.¹¹ Keener is not a commentator prone to look for classical parallels in the Gospel, but on this topic he makes some intriguing observations. At several points, he notes the similarities between John's account and what we know of ancient banqueting *practice*. The Fourth Gospel does not mention any women present at the meal. That is not surprising. Keener asks (p. 900): "Who might be present at the banquet? . . . In much of the Hellenistic world, women typically attended drinking parties only if they were courtesans or part of the entertainment." Keener cites as evidence several accounts of formal dinners, Isaeus *Estate of Pyrrus* 13–14, Plutarch *Alex.* 38.1, and suggests comparison with Isaeus *Estate of Philoctemon* 21.

Commenting on the descriptions of the "reclining" posture of Jesus and his disciples (John 13:12, 23), Keener notes that such a posture was characteristic of Greco-Roman banquets.¹² He also notes, relying on Jewish scholar Lee Levine,¹³ that Passover seders reflected Greco-Roman symposium practices, though both Levine and Keener acknowledge a debate about whether such practices antedated the Council of Yavneh at the end of the first century CE. One might argue that the Fourth Gospel simply reports how it actually was at Jesus' last supper, which he celebrated as a Passover seder a day ahead of the official calendar. But rather than going down the path of historical reconstruction, we should stay with the text and its description of the meal.

Keener, commenting further on John 13:23 and its picture of the beloved disciple reclining at the bosom of Jesus, notes that some symposia were occasions of special intimacy with close friends.

One might surround oneself with one's most intimate friends during the later hours of a banquet (13:23); thus Josephus dismissed other banqueters after a few hours, retaining near him only his four closest friends, during a time of great distress.¹⁴ At banquets disciples sat near their sages.¹⁵ Participants were seated according to their status. . . . Many banquet settings assigned three participants to each table, arranging diners in such a manner that in this scene one to the right of Jesus would need only have leaned his head back to find himself near Jesus' chest.¹⁶

¹¹ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003).

¹² Keener, *Gospel of John*, 901.

¹³ Lee Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 119–24. See also Siegfried Stein, "The Influence of Symposia Literature on the Literary Form of the Pesah Haggadah," *JJS* 69 (1957) 13–44.

¹⁴ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 915 n. 182 refers to Josephus, *Life* 223.

¹⁵ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 915 n. 183 refers to *t. Sanh.* 7:9.

¹⁶ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 915.

Keener further notes that the Beloved Disciple at the side of Jesus (who, he suggests, was leaning on his left arm) is in a position of “special intimacy.”¹⁷ All of this talk of “intimacy” some might find a bit disturbing. Is there some hint of the picture of Jesus that we tend to associate with Morton Smith’s reconstruction of Jesus? Keener is apparently sensitive to the issue. Citing Johannine commentator Ernst Haenchen¹⁸ and Bruce Malina,¹⁹ Keener notes “One might also lay one’s head on another’s bosom, which in that culture far more tactile than our own, had no necessary sexual connotations.” For ancient evidence he cites Diogenes Laertius 1.84, and as an example of the seating preferences, Plato’s *Symp.* 222E–223A. The latter certainly describes the way in which certain positions might be more honorable than others, but given the general subject matter of the dialogue, it is odd to see the *Symposium* appear in connection with an argument that touch did not necessarily have sexual connotations.

Keener is aware that one might “read” the distinctive descriptors of the Last Supper in the Fourth Gospel in a different way and he continues his effort to distinguish the formal dining features of the Gospel and ancient symposia. In critical dialogue with Sjef van Tilborg,²⁰ Keener, reflects on the relationship between Jesus and his beloved disciple and argues:

Greek teachers sometimes selected a particular pupil to whom to give special love, sometimes related to the general Greek concept of “love of boys.”²¹ Some compare this role with the beloved disciple’s special role in the story world of the Fourth Gospel, though pointing out that the beloved disciple acts differently with Jesus than the Greek teachers’ “favorite” disciples did with their teachers.²²

At this point, in a footnote,²³ Keener again cites Plato’s *Symp.* 217–18 in order to illustrate what kind of behavior might go on between teachers and their favorites, but noting that despite the blandishments of Alcibiades, presumably the “Beloved Disciple” in the context of Plato’s *Symposium*, “Socrates, in exemplary manner, does not become aroused.” Keener, I think, has put his finger on an important point here, but he does not make of it what one should. He goes on:

¹⁷ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 916.

¹⁸ Keener, *Gospel of John* 916 n. 184; Ernst Haenchen, *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 2:110.

¹⁹ Bruce J. Malina, *The Social World of Jesus and the Gospels* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 22–23.

²⁰ Sjef van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love in John* (BIS 2; Leiden: Brill, 1993), and van Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus* (NovTSup 83; Leiden: Brill, 1996).

²¹ Keener, *Gospel of John*, n. 202 cites Tilborg, *Imaginative Love*, 77–81, 86–86.

²² Keener, *Gospel of John*, 917.

²³ Keener, *Gospel of John*, n. 204, still arguing with Tilborg, *Reading John in Ephesus*, 149.

The context for the analogy [*scil.* between the Fourth Gospel and ancient teacher-pupil relations], however, is more distant than one might hope. Given John's Jewish context, any implied sexual relationship would be impossible without the Gospel somewhere indicating a lifting of Jewish sexual taboos, and without the sexual component the comparison loses at least some (and possibly much more) of its force. Rabbis also had favorite disciples whom they praised (e.g., *m. Avot* 2:8), and such praiseworthy disciples could become successors without any sexual overtones.

Keener's apologetic concerns and focus on social practice govern the shape of his treatment of the last supper in John. But he does usefully point out features of this meal account that distinguish it from those of the other Gospels. Are these features simply reflections of social practice, or are they literary gestures, subtly suggesting a context for our construal of this special dinner?

I suggest that the latter is the case, and not simply because of my desire to argue for a connection with symposiast literature, but because this is the way the evangelist operates elsewhere. It might just help for purposes of comparison to remember how the evangelist introduces the episode of the Samaritan woman in John 4, with a gesture toward a type of scene freighted with erotic overtones, in order finally to tell a tale of how *eros* can be converted to *agape* and apostolic mission.²⁴ Something similar is going on here.

What we have in John 13 is not simply a description of a historical event, whatever reminiscences may lie behind the story, but an artful account of a meal that enshrines a conversation about love and that evokes other meals with a similar focus. The meal and its conversation are framed, in part, by the depiction of a loving, intimate relationship. Exactly how that intimacy works is left, for the moment, to the imagination.

If we can take as at least plausible that there is some "gesture" toward the genre of the symposium, however ironic the gesture might be, are there any other features of the account in the Fourth Gospel that might be relevant? In order to answer that question, it might be useful to review briefly the two potential intertexts.

Plato's *Symposium*

The basic plot of Plato's dialogue is familiar, but a brief summary will help to make the essential points of comparison. The dialogue recounts how a group of gentlemen gather for dinner and decide that rather than the

²⁴ For a reading of the passage, see Harold W. Attridge, "The Character of the Samaritan Woman in John 4: A Woman Transformed," forthcoming in a collection on characterization in the Fourth Gospel.

raucous party they had enjoyed the night before, they would be more moderate, more sober, and devote themselves to a celebration of love, of which the paradigm is the love of a mature man for a boy. Their post-prandial entertainment, therefore, is a series of speeches, each reflecting the character and profession of the speaker. So the doctor, Eryximachus, offers a medical analysis, drawing on contemporary theories of humors and elemental balance. The comic poet Aristophanes provides an amusing tale that comments on the variety of contemporary sexual preferences and practices, with its famous myth of the androgyne. The tragic poet Agathon offers a poetic description of erotic attraction. Finally Socrates offers two speeches, one a typical Socratic critique of Agathon, the other a report of a revelation about love provided to him by a prophetess, Diotima.

Diotima's speech, shrouded in a mantle of religious mystery, is a climactic moment in the dialogue, articulating an ideal of love that is, in many ways, attractive: Love has a transcendent thrust. The pursuit of the beautiful mounts a chain of being, starting from the physical and moving through the social and scientific to the absolute ideal. The effort to attain that beauty is not an attempt to acquire it for oneself, but a drive to replicate and reproduce it. Absolute beauty is not reproduced in a physical way, but through the inculcation of virtue in the souls of the beloved. In Diotima's speech, which criticizes and marginalizes the physical orientation of the other encomiasts of *eros*, Platonic love is born.

The speech is a pivotal moment in the dialogue, but it is not the end of the story and one of the important structural points to be made is that the relationship between the end of the dialogue and the lovely speeches is crucial to the way the whole piece works. What follows, of course, is the advent of Alcibiades, already a young political and military leader, destined, as the readers know, for a tragic fate that will lead to Athenian disaster. Alcibiades enters the party inebriated and manages to tell another tale about love, namely the love that he had for his older comrade in arms, Socrates. In that relationship, the roles of (elder) lover and (youthful) beloved are reversed. The one who should have been the pursuer, Socrates, became the pursued, and the youth, who should have been the beloved, Alcibiades, became the pursuer. Yet, as Keener in his note on the parallel to Jesus and the Beloved Disciple in effect remarked, Alcibiades could get no satisfaction. Socrates, Alcibiades tells the banqueters, would not respond to his advances, entranced as he was by some sort of ethereal vision.

The point of this final scene is not simply that Socrates was a man of admirable restraint. He was, in fact, illustrating in action the principle articulated in Diotima's discourse. He tried, however unsuccessfully as history would witness, to inculcate virtue in the soul of Alcibiades. The climactic speech of Diotima provides a framework for understanding the ac-

tion that concludes the dialogue and the action provides an example in flesh and blood of what Diotima's ideal would mean in a society where, as feminist historian Eva Keuls suggested, the phallus reigned.²⁵

Plutarch's *Amatorius*

A second example is one of Plutarch's many symposia. Particularly relevant to our inquiry, the *Amatorius* is clearly indebted to Plato and is roughly contemporary with the Fourth Gospel.²⁶

Space does not permit a description of all the complexities of the arguments, which involve spirited defenses of Eros in its various forms, including those explored in Plato's dialogue. The two main contenders are pederasty and marital love. By the end of the dialogue it is clear where Plutarch's sympathies lie. It is also clear that he wants to defend a significant moral agency for women.

The story, recounted by Plutarch's son, tells a tale of how his father, Plutarch, and his friends travelled to a town to celebrate a festival in honor of Aphrodite. When they arrived, they gathered for a pleasant dinner, a somewhat informal symposium. As the background to their conversation stands a strange series of events in the town. The population is in a tizzy over the love affair of Ismenodora and Bacchon. Ismenodora, a mature woman, has fallen madly in love with a younger man and goes so far as to kidnap him with the aim of making him marry her. The carnivalesque frame is as integral to Plutarch's designs as the story of Socrates and Alcibiades at the end of the *Symposium* is integral to its picture of Platonic love. The frame invites the reader to consider whether the passionate Ismenodora is a virtuous woman and, in particular, whether she is a possible example of σωφροσύνη. The conventional answer would seem to be no, but Plutarch wants his readers to worry about that glib response.²⁷

The dialogue between Plutarch and his friends echoes many of the themes of Plato's *Symposium*, with its exploration of the pros and cons of love between men and boys. But in many ways, this seems to be conventional window dressing. Plutarch's interest instead focuses on the behavior of Ismenodora, which is a topic of conversation among the symposiasts.

²⁵ Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).

²⁶ Herwig Görgemanns, Barbara Feichtinger, Fritz Graf, Wermer Jeanrond and Jan Opsomer, eds., *Plutarch, Dialog über die Liebe: Amatorius, Eingeleitet, übersetzt und mit interpretierenden Essays* (SAPER 10; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

²⁷ The use of the term in regard to female chastity is found in the philosophical tradition in Plutarch, *Conj. praec.* 9, 17 and *Amatorius* 21, 23.

Consider the contrast between the somewhat cynical Anthemion: “But if she is really modest and orderly (εἰ δ’ αἰσχύνεται καὶ σωφρονεῖ) let her sit decently at home awaiting suitors, men with serious designs. For if a woman makes a declaration of love, a man could only take to his heels in utter disgust, let alone accepting and founding a marriage on such intemperance (ἀκρασίαν).” Ismenodora would not be σώφρων in Anthemion’s mind.

Contrast the remarks of Plutarch, who defends marriage, with a touch of realism (*Amat.* 754C–D), as a place where Love tames unruly spirits; Love which is itself the “fiercest and warmest of all our enthusiasms,” much in evidence of course in Ismenodora.

True love, with all its enthusiasm, is not incompatible with σωφροσύνη. The ideal is, as Plutarch the character says, the “noble and self controlled lover (σώφρονος ἐραστοῦ) . . . His regard is refracted to the other world, to Beauty divine and intelligible” (*Amat.* 766A), all of this a clear echo of Diotima’s speech. Note the paradoxical formulation σώφρων ἐραστής.

Plutarch finally defines the virtue of temperance (σωφροσύνη), as a “mutual self-restraint, which is a principal requirement of marriage” (*Amat.* 767E). This is set within the context of a vigorous defense of women’s virtue generally (*Amat.* 769B–D).

In this dialogue, which is clearly engaged in an intertextual play with Plato’s *Symposium*, Plutarch plays a role analogous to that of Diotima. He articulates a vision of love that is instantiated, at least partially, in the action the character who dominates the gossip story that frames the dialogue. Love is a form of heaven guided enthusiasm that embraces and tames passion and enables woman and man to live together virtuously.

The issues that Plutarch treats are, to say the least, somewhat removed from those of the Fourth Gospel. They reflect the philosophical concerns and social debates of upper class Greek culture in the high imperial period. Nonetheless, the dialogue that Plutarch produces has a significant structural similarity to the classical text that is clearly on the literary horizon. Reflection and action mutually interpret one another.

The Fourth Gospel and the Symposiast Tradition

The differences between the Fourth Gospel and the works of Plato and Plutarch are manifest and abundant. Most importantly perhaps, John 13–17 is not really a dialogue. Only one voice dominates, with minor interruptions, namely the voice of Jesus.

Moreover, the levity and ironic wit that characterize the two examples of symposiast literature (as well as many others) are not to be found in abundance in John. There may be little touches in the last supper dialogues

that provide some comic relief, such as the obtuseness of some of the disciples who interact with Jesus (e.g., at John 14:5 [Thomas], 14:8 [Philip]; 14:22 [Judas]). And there may even be some touches in the characterization of the disciples that faintly imitate the play on stereotypes in the speeches of Plato's *Symposium*, but these little touches are surrounded by an extensive discourse laden with serious concerns. Nonetheless, these little episodes of interlocution do add a touch of drama to what would otherwise be a tedious and repetitive testament or consolation speech. They provide a gesture, bending the genre of the last discourse into that of a consideration of love.

Three structural elements of the Last Supper discourses do suggest a more substantive relationship between these chapters and texts such as the *Symposium* or the *Amatorius*.

As in all the comparable pieces, the fundamental subject is love. The initial verses of John 13 signal the focus on that topic and it is enunciated in two prominent places in the chapters that follow, first in the "new commandment" of 13:31 and again in the proverb at the heart of the illustration of the "vine and branches," which symbolizes the intimate relationship of Jesus and his disciples (15:18). Jesus, in other words, inculcates a teaching about love in two distinct forms, first as a divine command that, for all its proclaimed "newness," echoes the command of Torah (Lev 18) and then as a proverb about the greatest love that friends have, which finds its closest parallels in classical literature.²⁸

As has long been recognized, there is a significant relationship between the Last Supper discourses and the event of the crucifixion/resurrection. The relationship is complex and to explore all of its ramifications would take far more time and space than is available. Nonetheless, the speeches interpret the final event and the event shows what the concrete meaning of the theory of the speeches. To love as Jesus has loved is to heed his command and to follow his example of humble service, a service that does not stop short of ultimate self-sacrifice. That is the significance of the cross, the vision of which draws all to Jesus²⁹ and to understand it provides true

²⁸ See, e.g., Cicero, *De amicitia* 24. For discussion of the proverbial phrase, see Hartwig Thyen, "Niemand hat grössere Liebe als die, daß er sein Leben für seine Freunde hingibt," in *Theologia Crucis-Signum Crucis: Festschrift für Erich Dinkler zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. C. Andresen and Günter Klein; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1979), 467–81; Klaus Scholtissek, "'Eine grössere Liebe als diese hat niemand, als wenn einer sein Leben hingibt für seine Freunde' (Joh 15,13)," in *Kontexte des Johannesevangeliums: Das vierte Evangelium in religions- und traditions-geschichtlicher Perspektive* (ed. Jörg Frey and Udo Schnelle; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 413–42.

²⁹ See John 3:14–15. On the importance of that climactic vision, see Harold W. Attridge, "The Cubist Principle in Johannine Imagery: John and the Reading of Images in Contemporary Platonism," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes and*

healing. In other words, what is said at dinner, as in the *Symposium* and the *Amatorius*, does not stay at dinner, but is carried out in action.

The claims of the Fourth Gospel about the significance of the death of Christ are, as is well known, highly ironic. The physical “lifting up” of Jesus on the ignominious instrument of a torturous death is, in the eyes of faith, his glorification and the manifestation of the splendor of the Divine Name. The dialogues about love also delight in irony, although not as radical as that of the Fourth Gospel. The reversal of roles of lover and beloved in the final act of Plato’s drama provides a distant parallel, as does the celebration of the manic sobriety of true love in Plutarch. Irony is a common tool, but used for different ends.

The heart of the difference may be evident in considering one last point of commonality between John and the two examples of symposiast literature. Particularly in Plato’s *Symposium*, the dialogue’s pivotal speech has a hieratic, revelatory quality. Diotima is a prophetess and the word that she proclaims comes as a revelatory message. Plutarch was certainly a priest, although not much is made of that status in the *Amatorius*, however authoritative his final intervention might be. The climax of the last supper discourses in their present form is the final prayer of Jesus in John 17, occasionally characterized as a High Priestly prayer. What lies behind that epithet is the appeal for the sanctification of his followers (17:17–19).³⁰ But that sanctification is based on something that distinguishes John’s “symposium” from its distant generic cousins: the prayer that all the disciples might be one as Father and Son are one (17:21). That is the source of their holiness, and, as the earlier appearances of the motif suggest, it is from that unity with the divine persons that the recommended love will flow. If John gestures toward the structure of symposiast paeans to love, he departs from them most markedly here.

Conclusion

Two of the most influential pieces of the ancient literary heritage, Plato’s *Symposium* and the Gospel according to John, involve dialogues focused on love. The two differ in many ways, simple and profound, but they also have some intriguing literary features in common. Both articulate a theory of what love is really all about, Diotima’s speech in the *Symposium*, and

Theology of Figurative Language (ed. Jörg Frey, Jan G. van der Watt, Ruben Zimmermann, in collaboration with Gabi Kern; WUNT 200; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 47–60.

³⁰ On this passage see Harold W. Attridge, “How Priestly is the ‘High Priestly’ Prayer of John 17,” *CBQ* 75 (2013): 1–15.

the Last Supper discourse in John. Both texts frame the dialogue with a narrative that exemplifies in a concrete way what the theory means in very human terms. For Plato that narrative is the account given by the drunken Alcibiades, who has crashed the party, of his relationship with Socrates. For the evangelist, it is the account of the passion and resurrection of Jesus. These rather abstract, formal similarities mask important differences in the accounts of love that both develop and the ways in which appropriate love is grounded.