Auth: Please confirm that your Greek is correct throughout. We had to use a different font for it than the one used in Word, and sometimes that alters the characters.

In the Lap of Jesus: The Hermeneutics of Sex and Eros in John's Portrayal of the Beloved Disciple

JEFF JAY
University of Chicago

In the Bible, the Gospel According to John depicts Jesus during dinner in intimate repose with a disciple who appears as the special object of his love: "One of his disciples was reclining in the lap [ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ] of Jesus, the one whom Jesus loved" (13:23). Peter prompts this disciple to inquire about the identity of the betrayer whom Jesus has recently foretold: "That one, then, leaning back this way on the chest [ἐπὶ τὸ στῆθος] of Jesus says to him, 'Lord, who is it?'" (13:25). Near the end of the gospel these details resurface when the narrator identifies "the disciple whom Jesus loved" with a retrospective reference to him as the one "who also leaned back at the dinner on the chest [ἐπὶ τὸ στῆθος] of Jesus" (21:20).[1] What do these narrative details mean? What should reclining in the lap of Jesus be taken to imply? For answers scholars refer to well-known and much-recycled comparanda from the Septuagint (the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures) and early Christian literature.[2] In the Septuagint a depiction of a mother or nurse holding a child in the lap or bosom suggests breastfeeding.[3] In Luke 16:22 and 16:23, Lazarus reclines in the lap of "father" Abraham, which suggests parental cradling, fatherly warmth, and benevolence.[4] Elsewhere in the Septuagint a man holds his precious

[1] Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland, and Barbara Aland, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012). All translations are my own.

[2] See the texts cited in Rudolf Meyer, "κόλπος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:824–26; and Frederick William Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "κόλπος."

[3] Num 11:12 (LXX); 3 Kgdms 3:20 (LXX); Ruth 4:16 (LXX). See also examples from Latin authors: Claud., *In Rufinum* 94–95; Tac., *Dial.* 28.4; *Agr.* 4.2; Sen., *Prov.* 2.5; *Troades* 798; Alicia D. Myers, "'In the Father's Bosom': Breastfeeding and Identity Formation in John's Gospel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (July 2014): 481–97; and Myers, *Blessed Among Women? Mothers and Motherhood in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 77–108.

[4] Martin O'Kane, "'The Bosom of Abraham' (Luke 16:22): Father Abraham in Visual Imagination," *Biblical Interpretation* 15, no. 4 (2007): 485–518. See also L. J. van der Lof,

Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol. 28, no. 3, September 2019

DOI: 10.7560/JHS28306

sheep in this way, and in Greco-Roman literature parents hold children in their laps and wealthy Romans their pets.[5]

The purpose of this article is to introduce a whole new set of comparanda from literature describing reclining at banquets in the Greco-Roman world. Most of this evidence is unknown in scholarly interpretations of John. These texts make references to dining, reclining, laps, chests, lap-holding pairs, and love. They thus provide more precise parallels to the reference to the "lap of Jesus" than the parallels that scholars have cited in order to interpret the phrase. As I will show, when this posture appears in literature depicting couch sharing, reclining, and dining, it is in nearly every case part of a broader characterization of lovers and thus brings with it a range of complex cultural expectations about and reactions to the sexual identities and gender performances of the lap-holding pair. Reclining in the lap during dinner repeatedly functions as one topos in a concatenation of sexual features, traits, actions, and preferences. Lap holding thus can be shown to evoke broader and culturally specific organizations of sex and gender. Insofar as lap holding almost always plays out in particular performances of certain definite types of sexual style and action, I will show how ancient writers repeatedly tie descriptions of beloveds in laps to a variety of broader erotic morphologies or practices. My broadest claim is that this much-overlooked evidence must somehow be accounted for when interpreting John's portrayal of the beloved disciple. What role do sex and eros play in John's portrayal of Jesus's relationship with the beloved? By drawing attention to fresh evidence, I shall demonstrate that this is a question that can no longer be glossed over, dismissed out of hand, relegated to the scholarly fringe, or considered a topic of disrepute.[6] The question of sex and eros lies

"Abraham's Bosom in Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Augustine," *Augustinian Studies* 26, no. 2 (1995): 109–23.

[5] 2 Kgdms 12:2 (LXX); Plut., *Dem.* 31.6; *Per.* 1.1; *De tranq. anim.* 472C; Apul., *Apol.* 88.5, 86.4; Cic., *Fam.* 6.3 (XIV.4); Catull. 2.2, 3.8; Sen., *Controv.* 2.3; also 2 Clem. 4.5, which is difficult to interpret because it lacks a description of the banqueting (or any) context.

[6] See, most recently, William Loader, "Reading Romans 1 on Homosexuality in the Light of Biblical/Jewish and Greco-Roman Perspectives of Its Time," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108, no. 1 (2017): 119–41. Loader dismissively writes: "The reference to 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' in John need have no sexual reference" (127). See also Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 337; and Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 121–22. Nissinen argues that "the homoerotic or pederastic dimension of their relationship could be argued only in a strained way from very limited material. . . . The custom of a student resting against his teacher's chest manifests cultural convention . . . ; in this sense the relationship between Jesus and his favorite disciple evinces homosociability that tolerates also physical expressions of mutual attachment" (122). Similarly, Robert A. J. Gagnon makes "the obvious conclusion that there is no evidence that Jesus ever engaged in homoerotic behavior" (*The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2001], 188n2). The evidence I shall present complicates statements such as these. I avoid writing of "homoeroticism," which is too ambiguous, in favor of more specific relational descriptions.

at the heart of what is at stake here, that is, a relational practice and an experience of love that frustrate, indeed almost elude, contemporary sensibilities.

Method and Prior Scholarship

In analyzing these texts, I will write of ancient sexual "morphologies" or "practices." This permits a freedom of description that is as unmoored as possible from contemporary sexual categories and norms and thus enables an analysis that takes seriously, to use David M. Halperin's words, the possibility of "radically different experiences of erotic subjectivity" in the premodern cultures of Greece and Rome.[7] Halperin writes of "sexual morphology" when he is analyzing the figure of the *cinaedus*, whom I will also discuss.[8] But he also writes of the need to recognize that premodern cultures contained different types of sexual "ethos," "style," "subjectivity," or "identity" with which people connected specific sexual acts.[9] Halperin is explicit about his own terminological uncertainty when he writes of "pre-homosexual discourses, practices, categories, patterns, or models (I am really not sure what to call them)."[10] My argument likewise privileges historical alterity in order to demonstrate that reclining in the lap during dinner consistently appears in prehomosexual discourses in Greek and Roman literature describing the reclining banquet. This fact should affect the way we interpret the Johannine portrayal of Jesus with his beloved.

I am not the first to investigate the relationship between Jesus and the beloved for its potential erotic implications, though this is the first account to privilege a historicist analysis focusing on the evidence for the meaning of lap holding while reclining during dinner. Throughout the history of interpreting John there has been a steady if small undercurrent of readers who take this love of Jesus for his beloved to be in some way sexual, physically intimate, and/or eroticized.[11] Sjef van Tilborg contributed a historical-literary interpretation in this direction in 1993, arguing that Jesus's relationship with the beloved disciple is an expression of pederasty, which he correctly identifies as a sexual code prominent in the late first and early

[7] David M. Halperin, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 2–3.

[8] Halperin, 38.

[9] Halperin, 24–47.

[10] Halperin, 108.

[11] The history of the reception of this text warrants much more investigation. For a valuable start, see Theodore W. Jennings, *The Man Jesus Loved: Homoerotic Narratives from the New Testament* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 75–91. Jennings writes of a "hidden tradition" of interpreters who read this relationship for its erotic implications and treats Aelred of Rivaulx, Christopher Marlowe, Jeremy Bentham, and Georg Walther Groddeck. On Aelred, see also John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 225–26, though Boswell only mentions the beloved disciple in John in passing (115 and 117n78).

second century CE, when the Gospel According to John likely received its canonical form. He argues, moreover, that by virtue of this relationship Jesus elevates this disciple to play an authoritative role in communicating Jesus's words and significance to future generations.[12] Expanding on Van Tilborg's argument, I will draw attention to the vehemently hostile rhetoric of ancient authors who disdainfully parody pederasty and other models of male love. This rhetoric attests to the contested cultural environment in which the author of John fashioned his portrayal and that Van Tilborg overlooks.

Van Tilborg's analysis is limited in another way as well. He draws an image of Jesus's family relationships that emphasizes the family constellation of an intrusive mother, an absent father, hostile brothers, and a Father (God) who assumes heavenly proportions.[13] Van Tilborg remarks how strikingly this accords with Freudian theory: "It is the typical model of a family which tends to produce and develop a homosexual son."[14] This claim introduces into the analysis of an ancient text categories that do not emerge until the nineteenth century with the advent of modern psychology and psychiatry. This speaks to a larger problem with Van Tilborg's argument, in that he develops his account without recognizing the need to analyze prehomosexual discourses in their positivity and with attention to their historical alterity.[15] Van Tilborg's foray into the psychoanalysis of Jesus's supposed homosexuality exemplifies how interpreting sex in antiquity and in this early Christian text in particular remains inattentive to ancient sexual models, norms, and practices.[16] I will try to avoid this trap by interpreting the many lap-holding couples in these texts in light of the complex map of ancient Mediterranean attitudes toward sex, which were shaped by status, age, sexual role (active/passive), and gender performance and not by the modern homo/hetero distinction or even by individuals' erotic gender preference. Analyzing ancient Mediterranean sexual culture and expectations

[12] Sjef van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love in John* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 77–110.

[13] Van Tilborg, 2–57.

[14] Van Tilborg, 53–57, 245–246 at 245.

[15] See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (1978; New York: Vintage, 1990); Halperin, *History of Homosexuality*, esp. 104–37; David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (London: Routledge, 1990), esp. 1–40; and Arnold I. Davidson, "Sex and the Emergence of Sexuality," *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 1 (1987): 16–48.

[16] Recent approaches lack robust historical interpretation of the sources in light of the sexual topography of ancient Mediterranean cultures. See John A. Dally, "The Eternally Begotten Son: Language, Desire, and Resurrection in the Gospel of John and Proust's *Recherche*" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1994); Robert E. Goss, "John," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest et al. (London: SCM Press, 2006), 548–65; Jennings, *Man Jesus Loved*, 13–104; and Tat-siong Benny Liew, "Queering Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John's Engendering and Trans-gendering Word across Different Worlds," in *They Were All Together in One Place: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009), 251–88.

with attention to sexual morphologies and practices more clearly represents the alterity of the terms, logics, and concepts of these ancient societies and explicates what beloveds in laps signified in this context. These meanings, as I will emphasize, defy modern expectations; there are no easy parallels between ancient male love and the contested definitional fields of modern homosexuality. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, however, this does not mean that there are no continuities over time. One sexual regime does not simply supplant another. Rather, sexual categories accrue. Older ones residually appear within more recent ones, and this effectively produces the plural, varied, and contradictory experiences of same-sex sex and sexual identities in the contemporary world.[17] These texts thus hold up a funhouse mirror to contemporary expectations and debates about sex, reflecting in various ways both identity and difference.

Lap Holding and the Subversion of Masculine Norms

Interpreters of John have established that Jesus and the beloved recline together and share a couch, a posture that was typical not only at symposia, which were common throughout the Greco-Roman world, but also at other types of ancient banquets or dinners. A participant would recline on a couch by leaning on his left elbow. A single couch had enough room for two or three participants to recline in this way.[18] These arrangements made it possible, if so desired, for a recliner to nestle snugly in his corecliner's lap.[19] Sharing a couch or reclining two or three per couch enables sociability at the banquet. To be sure, there is nothing necessarily erotic about reclining in twos or threes. However, the more intimate position whereby a person reclines in the lap of another during dinner is never without significance. In the rare occasions when lap holding appears in literature depicting reclining

[17] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, rev. ed. (1990; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 44–48. Along similar lines, see Halperin, *History of Homosexuality*, 10–13, 104–37; and Daniel Boyarin and Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Introduction: Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*: The Fourth Volume, or, a Field Left Fallow for Others to Till," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 3/4 (July/October 2001): 357–74 at 363–64.

[18] See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible 29 and 29A (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 2:574; and C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to Saint John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (1955; repr., London: SPCK, 1955), 446. For a variety of ways the Farewell Discourses in John 13–17 resemble the literary symposium tradition, see George L. Parsenios, *Departure and Consolation: The Johannine Farewell Discourses in Light of Greco-Roman Antiquity*, NovTSup 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 111–49; and Harold W. Attridge, "Genre Bending in the Fourth Gospel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 3–21 at 10.

[19] For images, see Jeff Jay, "Visualizing the Beloved Disciple in the Art of the Reclining Banquet," in *Painted Portrayals: The Art of Characterizing Biblical Figures*, ed. Heidi J. Hornik, Ian Boxall, and Bobbie Dykema (Atlanta: SBL Press, forthcoming).

at banquets, the posture is almost always embedded in the cultural semiotics of sex and gender. Authors such as Dio Cassius, Juvenal, Aulus Gellius, and others take the partner reclining in the lap to be an effeminate passive who challenges Roman expectations about virility as being ideally Priapic, after the hypermasculine Roman god Priapus, whose characteristically erect penis exudes the threat of sexual penetration, through which he expresses his potency over boys, girls, and women.[20] In the examples of beloveds to follow, three understandings of the meaning of the posture are clear: lap holding is depicted as amatory and explicitly erotic; the male in the lap plays the passive role in a sexual relationship with the male holding him; and most accounts ridicule the inside male for his gender-transient actions.

In an early third-century CE narrative about emperor Elagabalus, Dio Cassius describes him as sharing a couch with Aurelius Zoticus, an athlete renowned for his beauty and large penis: "After immediately bathing with Aurelius, and growing still more lustful when he stripped, since Elagabalus found Aurelius to match his reputation, Elagabalus reclined on Aurelius's chest and in his lap took dinner just as a beloved woman."[21] The emperor Elagabalus takes the inside position on the couch, where he "reclined" specifically ἐν τοῖς στέρνοις (on the chest) and ἐν τοῖς κόλποις (in the lap) of Aurelius—a near match to the wording in John 13:23, 13:25, and 21:20.[22] It is also significant that the two were intimately entwined at a "dinner." Dio Cassius describes Elagabalus as having cast himself in the role of "a beloved woman," who as the object of erotic desire in a convivial context evokes the stock figure of the *hetaera*—the courtesan hired to provide men

[20] Amy Richlin, *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*, rev. ed. (1983; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 57–80, 116–27; Jonathan Walters, "Invading the Roman Body: Manliness and Impenetrability in Roman Thought," in *Roman Sexualities*, ed. Judith P. Hallett and Marilyn B. Skinner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 29–43; Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 2nd ed. (1999; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 27–29, 94–102; Holt N. Parker, "The Tetratogenic Grid," in Hallett and Skinner, *Roman Sexualities*, 48–65; and Parker, "The Myth of the Heterosexual: Anthropology and Sexuality for Classicists," *Arethusa* 34, no. 3 (2001): 313–62. More recently, see also Maia Kotrosits, "Penetration and Its Discontents: Greco-Roman Sexuality, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, and Theorizing Eros without the Wound," in *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27, no. 3 (2018): 343–66. Kotrosits helpfully problematizes any blunt or essentialist application of the model in favor of the possibility that a less hierarchical "erotics of the mundane" might have been operative (364). With this corrective in mind, I employ the penetrative paradigm in a limited way with reference to specific texts, avoiding broader deductions about ancient sexual life in general.

[21] Dio Cass. 79.16.5 (*Casii Dionis Cocceiani historiarum Romanarum quae supersunt*, ed. U. P. Boissevain, 3 vols. [Berlin: Weidmann, 1895–1901]).

[22] The phrase ἐν τοῖς κόλποις, with κόλπος in the plural for singular, appears to be standard throughout the literature I analyze here. See, for example, *Greek Anthology*, 5.8, 107, 116, 136, 165, and 173. In contrast, the phrase ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ, with κόλπος in the singular, predominates throughout the Septuagint (e.g., Deut 13:7, 28:54, 28:56 [LXX]; 2 Kgdms 12:8 [LXX]; 3 Kgdms 3:10 [LXX]), which clearly influences the usage in John 13:23; see also Luke 16:22–23, which alternates between singular and plural with no change in the meaning.

companionship during a symposium. Dio Cassius emphasizes the eroticism of Elagabalus's cuddles with Aurelius, whose sizeable anatomical equipment Elagabalus appreciates in the bath. As the beloved, the emperor evidently prefers to take the passive role in the relationship, which is why the large penis attracts him. As the narrative unfolds, the emperor's longtime lover Hierocles jealously drugs Aurelius's wine, inducing a night of impotence, which leads Elagabalus to lose interest and expel Aurelius from Italy.

Dio Cassius creates the image of a passive emperor enslaved and manipulated by his desire to be penetrated. The critical picture that Dio Cassius draws of Elagabalus is an example of what Craig A. Williams calls the "protocols of masculine behavior," which dictated the penetrative sexual role for freeborn males' sexual intercourse with other males.[23] Elagabalus is critiqued for being the one who receives penetration when, as a freeborn man, he should be the one who penetrates. This is consistent with the narrative that precedes this episode, where Dio Cassius portrays Elagabalus more generally as a man who takes on female characteristics. He speaks cooingly with a high voice, spins wool, binds his hair in a net, wears makeup, depilates his anus, and is called "mistress" and "queen." Dio Cassius describes him as playing the role of wife to his male lover Hierocles, whom Dio Cassius calls Elagabalus's husband after having been bestowed to Hierocles as if in marriage.[24] Elagabalus also has intercourse with many women, including a Vestal virgin, and marries several of them, but Dio Cassius suggests that his primary aim in doing so was to examine studiously their passivity in order that he might imitate it "when sleeping with his lovers." Dio Cassius dramatizes the extremity of Elagabalus's gender deviance with two anecdotes. He first alleges that Elagabalus used to costume himself as a barmaid and enter a brothel, where he would drive out the prostitutes and play the prostitute himself. In the palace he would pretend to be a harlot and stand naked at the door of one of his chambers, offering himself to passersby. He would collect money for playing the passive role to his patrons and then boast to his friends that he had more lovers and had made more money than they did. To conclude this account, Dio Cassius relates that due to Elagabalus's long-standing but unfulfilled desire to castrate himself "because of his softness," he requested that physicians equip him with a vagina by means of an incision.[25]

Though this portrayal likely has some basis in historical reality, the depiction of Elagabalus as a bona fide gender-liminal figure is not without rhetorical embellishment.[26] It is a stock topos in ancient rhetoric to tarnish

[23] Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 18–19.

[24] Maud W. Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 55–81.

[25] Dio Cass. 79.5, 9, 11, 13, 16.

[26] With the caveat that he does not necessarily seek to defend notions of "the third sex," Craig A. Williams borrows the term "gender-liminal" from Niko Besnier's anthropological study of Polynesian societies: "Polynesian Gender Liminality through Time and Space," in

an opponent by accusing him of playing the passive role. Elagabalus is not the only Roman politician or emperor accused of doing so. Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, Octavian, Caligula, and Domitian all stand charged with passivity and/or prostituting themselves to males in Roman texts, and several historians record that Nero married males with whom he played the role of first husband and then wife.[27] Of special interest here is Suetonius's biography of Julius Caesar, in which Suetonius reports the allegation that Dolabella used to make against Caesar, calling him the "inner partner of the royal litter" and accusing him of playing the passive role in a love relationship with Nicomedes, the king of Bithynia.[28] The topos can be traced far back into fifth- and fourth-century Greek oratory, where orators often made passing reference to their opponents' active and passive, current and former pederastic relationships to discredit them to jurors. Especially relevant in this connection is Lysias's charges that Alcibiades "with many onlookers used to drink while reclining under the same cloak" with Archedemus.[29]

In this hyperbolic portrayal, Dio Cassius hurls a wide variety of the ancient world's reproaches against sex and gender deviance at Elagabalus. The result is that Elagabalus is overdrawn, and sexual types should be deduced from this text only with the utmost care.[30] Though Dio Cassius does not use the term in his account of Elagabalus's gender-transient actions, Elagabalus nonetheless in many ways resembles the stereotypical figure of the *cinaedus*, even if his particular transgressions far outstrip even this customary target of mockery. This term is difficult to gloss in English, and there has been debate about how to translate it. Neither Elagabalus nor the *cinaedus* can be easily described as "passive homosexuals," as the term is commonly used.[31] They are categorized not by sexual desire for men but by their

Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 285–328. See Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 233.

[27] Cic., *Phil.* 2.44–45; Dio Cass. 45.26; Suet., *Iul.* 2, 49, 52.3; *Aug.* 8.1; *Calig.* 36.1; *Ner.* 28; *Dom.* 1.1; Tac., *Ann.* 15.37; Dio Cass. 62.28, 63.13, 63.22. See also Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 86–104.

[28] Suet., *Iul.* 49.1.

[29] Lys., *Against Alcibiades I* 25. See the examples collected in *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 118–62. For a treatment of the topos in the context of Athenian political life, see John J. Winkler, *Constraints of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 45–70.

[30] This emperor is similarly portrayed in the *Historia Augusta*. For further analysis, see Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 26–29, 57–59.

[31] Even a scholar like Amy Richlin, who seeks to retain glosses like this in order to underline continuities between ancient Roman invective against the *cinaedus* and contemporary homophobic discourse, readily recognizes that homosexuality "is not a wholly adequate term to use of ancient Roman males, since adult Roman males usually penetrated both women and boys" ("Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the *Cinaedus* and the Roman Law against Love between Men," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 4 [1993]: 523–73 at 530). She admits that the title of her essay, "Not before Homosexuality," is "provocative rather than exact" (542).

gender liminality and deviancy, especially due to the sexual role they desire to play as the penetrated.[32] Aurelius, the one who penetrates, is not a target of criticism, and Elagabalus's inclination to be anally receptive is only one of several features that mark his gender transience. Of course, continuities can be drawn between Dio Cassius's rhetoric and modern homophobia, since both target sexual acts between males and deploy stereotypes about effeminacy.[33] But the sexual morphology operative in this text cuts across contemporary homo versus hetero categories and, in the process, dismantles their apparent inevitability. Elagabalus is an effeminate who undertakes to surgically obtain a vagina. His predilection is to play the passive role with other men, including Aurelius. But Aurelius is not singled out for criticism; instead, he is celebrated for his Priapic penis and athletic figure.

In Juvenal's *Satire* 2, a *cinaedus* named Gracchus reclines on the inside of the couch and is portrayed as a bride on her wedding night:

> Four hundred thousand sesterces Gracchus gave as dowry
> to a horn blower, or maybe he played a straight horn;
> with the contracts signed, "blessing" spoken, a huge company
> seated at the dinner, the new bride reclines in the lap of her husband.[34]

Though the fact that it is written in Latin makes lexical comparison impossible, this text, written sometime within the first fifteen years of the second century CE,[35] remains an important parallel to John 13:23, 13:25, and 21:20. Playing the role of "new bride" (in other words, the passive role), Gracchus is said "to recline" as the inside partner "in the lap of the husband" (gremio iacere mariti) during a dinner. The cuddling erotically charges these lines as Juvenal sets up an expectation that the newlyweds will soon perform as expected on their wedding night. He also makes a

[32] For gender deviance as the central defining feature of the *cinaedus* rather than his "homosexuality" or sexual object choice, see the accounts in Gleason, *Making Men*, 55–81; Halperin, *History of Homosexuality*, 32–38, 71–72; Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 191–202, 230–45; and Winkler, *Constraints of Desire*, 45–70.

[33] This is the main reason Richlin offers for retaining the term "passive homosexual" ("Not before Homosexuality," 528–30, 571–73). Williams agrees that there are continuities between ancient stereotypes about and castigation of *cinaedi* and modern homophobic rhetoric but rightly underlines that they were "not ridiculed qua homosexuals any more than were their insertive partners"; instead, they were ridiculed for their gender transience as specifically passive partners (*Roman Homosexuality*, 238). Halperin agrees and similarly resists "passive homosexuality," a usage for which he ardently critiques Richlin. But he too recognizes the genealogical continuity between the *cinaedus* and "the visibly disfigured victim of erotic malignancy who provided neurologists and psychiatrists in the latter part of the nineteenth century with the clinical basis for the first systematic scientific conceptualization and definition of pathological (or perverted) sexual orientation" (*History of Homosexuality*, 76, 127–28).

[34] Juv. 2.117–20 (Juvenal, *Satires*, ed. Susanna Morton Braund [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004]).

[35] For issues in dating *Satire* 2, see Edward Courtney, *A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal* (London: Athlone Press, 1980), 1, 122.

sex joke: the trumpeting groom's straight horn evokes an erect penis. This gender-deviant Gracchus is a later descendent of the Gracchi brothers, who were both eventually assassinated but who had distinguished themselves by pursuing land reforms in the late second century BCE. Juvenal describes the younger Gracchus as far more decadent than his forebears and as having been one of the Salii, an aristocratic order of priests of Mars who performed ritual dances.[36] Juvenal underlines the sheer incongruity of a sacred Salian priest, a member of the distinguished Gracchi clan no less, performing a war dance wearing a long dress and veil. These new-fangled male brides, he writes, are as appalling as a woman who births a calf or a cow who births a lamb.[37]

The depiction of Gracchus as a bride raises the possibility that marriage between males was practiced in Rome and presents a picture that dovetails with the text from Dio Cassius, who portrays Elagabalus as wedding his male lover Hierocles. Reviewing evidence from the first century BCE to the fourth century CE, Williams argues convincingly that wedding ceremonies between men may have occurred in Rome, but they do not seem to have had official legal sanction. Williams points out that in *Satire* 2 Juvenal writes of Gracchus's marriage with the apparent expectation that his audience will feel "disapproval perhaps, but not shock." According to Williams, what was objectionable about such a marriage to the Romans was that they assumed that there must be a male "bride," one who eschews his manhood by playing the passive role reserved for a woman, and they were offended that such a marriage could not produce legitimate offspring, which they considered to be the true purpose of any marriage. As the texts from both Juvenal and Dio Cassius demonstrate, the critiques of such matrimony focus not on male relationships as such but on the fact that by behaving as brides Gracchus and Elagabalus were rejecting Priapic masculine comportment.[38]

The target of Juvenal's *Satire* 2 is the stock figure of the *cinaedus*, whom the satirist mocks for playing the passive role in intercourse and for his other feminine traits, such as an obsession with hair, feminine dress, the use of makeup, skin care, possession of a mirror, castration, and women's work.[39] The satirist contrasts such men with the fiercely disciplined warriors of the past, who were exemplars of Roman masculinity.[40] The *cinaedus* is thus to be criticized not only for his sexual habits (in other words, his willingness to play the passive role) but also for his womanly habits in general. In this vein, the text opens with a parody of the hypocrisy of the philosophers,

[36] Courtney, 144–46.

[37] Juv. 2.121–39.

[38] See Williams, "Appendix 2: Marriage between Males," in *Roman Homosexuality*, 279–86. Williams documents only one instance in which the male who plays husband is the special focus of criticism: Nero for his marriage to his eunuch "bride" Sporos (Suet., *Ner.* 28; Dio Cass. 62.28, 63.13, 63.22).

[39] Juv. 2.12–13, 15, 50–51, 55–57, 66–78, 84–86, 91–93, 96–97, 100–103, 106–7, 117.

[40] Juv. 2.150–60.

whom Juvenal ridicules as *Socratici cinaedi*. They publicly preach austerity and sexual abstention but secretly depilate in preparation for anal penetration. But this is also part of a more broadly drawn effeminacy, which includes short hair, plucked eyebrows, and a noticeable feminine gait and expression.[41] Juvenal here picks up a common motif of the literature of the day: that philosophers' ostensive sexual austerity and moralism mask their true objective, which is to penetrate or to be penetrated by (as in Juvenal's *Satire* 2) the boys in their care to educate.[42] Elsewhere, Theomnestus, who appears in Pseudo-Lucian's *Erōtes* as a connoisseur of love with considerable erotic experience with both boys and women, remarks that Alcibiades did not rise unscathed from Socrates's couch, despite Alcibiades's claims to the contrary in Plato's *Symposium*.[43] In the hands of satirical writers like these, high-minded philosophical pedagogy was paramount to seduction.

In other texts throughout this period, lap holding functions polemically to revile the inside recliner as an effeminate. In the *Attic Nights*, for instance, Aulus Gellius quotes Scipio Aemilianus, who chastises a man named Sulpicius Galus (whom Gellius describes as an "effeminate man") for reclining on the inside of the couch. By taking this position, Galus plays the role of a passive lover and opens himself to Scipio's accusation that he is a *cinaedus*. Amy Richlin argues that Scipio delivered these words as part of a speech he gave during his census review of the equestrian class, a propertied order in Roman society below the senatorial class, in 142 or 141 BCE.[44] Scipio sought to remove Galus from the equestrians, citing his gender liminality as one reason warranting his removal. For Scipio, that Galus reclines on the inside of the couch signals his effeminacy, which is also proven by the fact that he wears a long-sleeved tunic, uses perfume and mirrors, pays attention to dress, trims his eyebrows, and has a well-groomed beard and smooth thighs.

Similarly, in Cicero's *In Catilinam* the long-sleeved tunic marks effeminacy together with well-groomed hair and the overuse of oils. This is part of Cicero's negative portrayal of the closest friends of Catiline, who stands accused of conspiring without success to overthrow the Roman Republic. Cicero describes Catiline's companions as friends "of his embrace and lap" and as devoted to "dinners" until dawn. The phrase "of his lap" appears also in Plutarch's biography of the younger Cato, where Aulus Gabinius is

[41] Juv. 2.1–35.

[42] For this motif, see also Mart. 1.24, 1.96, 7.58, 9.27, 9.47; Lucian, *Symp.* 36; Ath. 563d–f, 564f, 565d–f, 605d; Achilles Tatius 8.9.2–5; Petron., *Sat.* 86–88; Halperin, *One Hundred Years*, 88; also Richlin, "Not before Homosexuality," 542n47.

[43] Ps.-Lucian, *Erōtes* 54, in reference to Pl., *Symp.* 219c; also Lucian, *Vit. auct.* 15. See Pers. 5.37, where the poet recalls giving himself to his teacher, a certain Cornutus, at a ripe age, thus placing himself into the *Socraticus sinus* (Socratic lap).

[44] Aul. Gell. 6.12.4–5; Richlin, "Not before Homosexuality," 557. For translations and commentary, see Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome*, 208–11, 320; Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 192–93; and Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 21–22.

described as a man "from Pompey's lap [ἐκ τῶν κόλπων], as those who knew of his character and manner of life said."[45] The context of usage here is not the banquet, but Plutarch takes the fact that Gabinius is "from the lap" to signal something malignant about his way of life. Elsewhere in Plutarch's *Lives* Gabinius is portrayed as Pompey's flatterer and lackey, and this critique undoubtedly applies here too.[46] But the dining context from Cicero ups the ante of the critique. Cicero implies that Catiline plays both the sexually active and passive roles with his clique of lackeys, since these "effeminates" in their long-sleeved tunics have also learned "to love and to be loved." Lap holding during dinner implies not only that they are Catiline's flunkies but also that they are overindulgent and effeminate flunkies who provide added sexual benefits.[47] With regard to Aulus Gabinius, one might in turn wonder what "manner of life" might be taken to imply for readers who were embedded in a rhetorical context where being "from the lap" often had specifically sexual connotations.

In sum, lap holding might be taken to function in some instances as a semantic shorthand enabling an author to hint at broader sexual practice and gender nonconformity as a way to malign someone's character. The younger Pliny, for instance, writing a letter to an associate, emphasizes that a man named Veiento reclined "in the lap" of the emperor Nerva during dinner, using the words "and even" to insinuate something baleful about the character of Veiento, who is the target of Pliny's criticism throughout the letter.[48] This snide remark loses its critical force if it is simply read as describing Veiento as a close friend or right-hand man of the emperor.[49] To be sure, it might be taken to implicate him as a flatterer who has insinuated himself maliciously into the good graces of the emperor. The charge of being in the lap might carry another possible and even more vicious resonance, though less conclusively than the examples above: that Veiento was in Nerva's good graces precisely because he was playing the passive role with the emperor.[50]

[45] Plut., *Cat. Min.* 37.4. Meyer cites this but again misses the critical context ("κόλπος," 824). For the Latin phrase *ex sinu* or *in sinu* employed similarly to denote intimate associates, each time in a critical context, see Cic., *In Verrem* 2.27; *Phil.* 13.18. It is important to emphasize that none of these usages appears in the context of dining and reclining.

[46] Plutarch also describes Gabinius as ἄνδρα τῶν Πομπηΐου κολάκων ὑπερφυέστατον (the most monstrous man of Pompey's flatterers) (*Pomp.* 48.3) and εἷς τῶν Πομπηΐου συνήθων (one of Pompey's intimates (*Pomp.* 25.2). For other references to Gabinius, see Plu., *Ant.* 3.1, 3.4–6 (where Ptolemy entices him to join in war to retake Egypt by an offer of money), 7.2–3; *Cic.* 30.2, 31.4; *Sull.* 16.8, 17.7.

[47] Cic., *Cat.* 2.22–24.

[48] Plin., *Ep.* 4.22.4; for A. Didius Gallus Fabricius Veiento elsewhere, see Tac., *Ann.* 14.50; Dio Cass. 61.6.2; Juv. 3.185, 4.113–29, 6.133 (all of them critical). Pliny mentions him once elsewhere, where he seems to have maintained his influence (*Ep.* 9.13.13, 19).

[49] Both Barrett and Meyer cite this text as a parallel to John 13:23, but they miss Pliny's critical attitude toward Veiento. Barrett, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 446; and Meyer, "κόλπος," 824.

[50] Suet., *Dom.* 1.1.

The texts analyzed thus far demonstrate that reclining on a couch in the embrace of another male during dinner frequently signaled a distinctive sexual type. It is a morphology stamped primarily by the gender deviance the man in the lap enacts through his implied passivity and other, more overt feminine habits. The inside recliner violates the semiotics of Roman manhood by assuming a posture that contravenes the movements and placements of a properly gendered masculine body. Along with hair care, shaving, and use of oils or perfumes, inside reclining in the lap is one of many symptoms of gender liminality.[51] Insofar as it is passivity and not male sex or intimacy as such that is the target of criticism, this is a morphology that cannot be articulated adequately within the categories of our own present-day sexual regimes, in which it is the gender of a person's sexual object choice that is pivotal for hetero/homo classifications.

Maud Gleason helpfully underlines what such assaults on the *cinaedus* assume: the existence of men who embody a counterimage and actively cultivate the effeminate style in order to appear chic and elegant. With a few exceptions, the words of men who cultivate effeminacy are mostly lost, Gleason argues, because literary elites felt pressured to exude a strong masculine persona in their writings.[52] Such strictures, however, did not garner universal consent, and Gleason plausibly posits a considerable variety of attitudes on a sliding scale where the cultural issue is how much feminine elegance is too much, making this somewhat a matter of personal taste. Similarly, when Juvenal mocks the *Socratici cinaedi* he parodies philosophers and other educators who cultivated love relationships with their younger adolescent or sometimes older students. Juvenal in particular seeks to mock Stoic philosophers who preached sexual abstinence but whose constant interaction with and access to students suggested otherwise and, together with their effeminacy, betrayed their hypocrisy. Elite Roman writers harbored considerable anxiety about the sexual involvement of teachers with their students. While openly admiring the beauty of smooth-skinned youths, Roman elites thought it imperative to protect their freeborn sons from corruption by providing only educators of impeccable self-control.[53] Undoubtedly, this unease betrays a social-sexual practice of first-century sexual

[51] For these terms, see Gleason, *Making Men*, xxvi–xxvii. Gleason writes in this way throughout the entire book.

[52] One exception is the early second-century CE philosopher-sophist Favorinus, some of whose speeches survive and who was born with a penis but no testicles. He became notorious for his high-pitched voice or falsetto, by which he enchanted his audiences; for discussion, see Gleason, *Making Men*, 1–20, 131–58. For an ancient biography, see Philostr., *VS* 489–92. Another exception is Hostius Quadra in Sen., *Q Nat.* 116. See Shadi Bartsch, *The Mirror of the Self: Sexuality, Self-Knowledge, and the Gaze in the Early Roman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 103–14.

[53] Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 223–24; Walters, "Invading the Roman Body," 33–35; Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 78–84. Among the examples they cite are Quint., *Inst.* 1.2.4, 2.2.1–5, 2.2.14; Juv. 10.224, 295–345; Sen., *Controv.* 4.pr.11; Plin., *Ep.* 3.3.4, 7.24; Suet., *Aug.* 44.2; and Petron., *Sat.* 86–88.

topography where love for younger male adolescents was fully embraced and was even flourishing.[54] As I will show, lap holding also functions as a highly desirable form of intimacy between lovers.

Lap Holding as Desirable Intimacy

The first example comes from the collection of 258 pederastic epigrams preserved in the *Greek Anthology*, Book Twelve. One of these epigrams is ascribed to Automedon, whose poems were a part of the collection of Philip of Thessalonica, meaning that he likely wrote it in the mid-first century CE.[55]

> I had dinner yesterday with the physical trainer Demetrius,
> most blessed of all men.
> One reclined in his lap, one over his shoulder,
> one served the food, another brought drink.
> In truth, an admirable foursome! But I, joking with him,
> said, "Also at night, my dear man, do you train them?"[56]

Just as in John 13:2, the poet specifies that the occasion is a "dinner" where the men recline, eat, and drink. One of the "admirable foursome," moreover, is said to have been reclining specifically ὑποκόλπιος (in his lap or possibly under his lap, in other words, closer to the genitals). That this male was a boy or younger adolescent is evident from the context, because Demetrius, who takes the outside position on the couch, was by profession a physical trainer, giving him easy access to youths in the gymnasium and palaestra. Since young males trained, exercised, wrestled, and bathed naked, older men had easy access to them in those spaces, which became prime places for pederastic courtship.[57] The other main locale for courtship was at the symposium, where this poem is set. Couch sharing in this

[54] In addition to Gleason, *Making Men*, see Mark Masterson's analysis of the dissonance and ambivalence in enactments of masculinity throughout antiquity: "Studies of Ancient Masculinity," in *A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities*, ed. Thomas K. Hubbard (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Blackwell, 2014), 17–30.

[55] For details about the date and the complex history of compilation that lie behind the *Greek Anthology* (hereafter abbreviated *GA*), see Peter Bing and Jon Steffen Bruss, introduction to *Brill's Companion to Hellenistic Epigram*, ed. Bing and Bruss (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1–26 at 20–26; also, Alan Cameron, *The Greek Anthology: From Meleager to Planudes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). For Philip's *Garland* in particular, see Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 34, 47; A. S. F. Gow and D. L. Page, *The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip and Some Contemporary Epigrams*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 1:xi–xlix; Cameron, *Greek Anthology*, 33–43, 56–65.

[56] 12.34 in *Anthologia Graeca*, ed. H. Beckby, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Munich: Heimeran, 1965). For commentary, see Gow and Page, *Greek Anthology*, 2:187. Van Tilborg has suggested this text as a parallel to John 13:23, 13:25, and 21:20 but does not interpret it (*Imaginative Love*, 89–90).

[57] For the gymnasium as a place of pederastic pursuit, see Aeschin., *In Tim.* 10, 132, 135; Pl., *Symp.* 217c; also Plut., *Amat.* 751A, 751F–752C.

context coincides with drinking, singing, and entertainment. Kenneth Dover highlights how in this context couch sharing is well adapted for "serious embracing and titillating" between males, as well as between males and courtesans and female entertainers.[58] In this text the poet expresses admiration for the boy-magnet Demetrius and gestures toward the obvious erotic potential with a joke that puns on Demetrius's profession: this παιδοτρίβης (physical trainer) by day surely must παιδοτριβεῖν (physically train) these boys by night. It is possible that there is a further play on the latter term's roots, since παιδοτριβεῖν is a compound derived from παῖς (boy) and τρίβειν (to rub) and could, in a context like this, be taken to denote not only "training boys," or literally rubbing them with oil in preparation for their exercise, but also "rubbing boys" for sexual stimulation.[59] The poet thus follows certain basic practices of pederasty. An older lover responsible for training beloved boys is described as engaging in physical intimacy at a symposium with clear possibilities for sexual attainment. What distinguishes Demetrius is his alleged promiscuity, which is where the humor of the poem is supposed to lie. Here the issue is not the passivity of the inside recliner and his gender inversion, as in the above examples, but rather the construction of a fantasy.[60] The poet invites the male authorial audience to hanker after Demetrius's place on the couch. Boys hang all over him, some he snuggles and fondles, others serve food and drink; the poem ends only after piquing the reader's imagination about what Demetrius does at night.

In terms of their social status, Demetrius's παῖδες (boys) should be taken to be freeborn, since the text implies that the trainer has access to them in the gymnasium, which was only accessible to citizens. The poem harks back to classical Athenian pederasty, where freeborn adolescent males who would one day be citizens could play the role of a beloved, who ideally gave in to the lover only after sustained courtship and gifts and with assurance that the pursuer had a vested interest in seeing to the young man's future

[58] Kenneth Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (1978; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 94. Although he expresses this point anachronistically with the words "homosexual and heterosexual approaches," Dover is far from naive about the historical specificity of the phenomenon and underlines its clear differences from contemporary categories of sexual normativity (1, 15–17).

[59] For eroticism in wrestling and oil rubbing in the gymnasium, see Amy Richlin, *Marcus Aurelius in Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 125n1; and Thomas K. Hubbard, "Pindar's *Tenth Olympian Ode* and Athlete-Trainer Pederasty," *Journal of Homosexuality* 49, no. 3–4 (2005): 137–71. Similarly, the term τριβάς is a sexual term denoting a woman who has sexual relations with another woman apparently because she stimulates her partner by rubbing her genitals. See Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4–9; and *LSJ*, s.v. "τριβάς."

[60] On the role of fantasy in Greek and Latin erotic epigram, see Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 32–56.

success.[61] Even then, as Dover argues, assuming the passive role in anal sex was problematic for a freeborn youth, especially because of the cultural perception of social subordination that it implied, which would threaten his eligibility for citizenship; the evidence suggests, moreover, that these boys offered other services for bringing their lovers to a climax, especially intercrural intercourse.[62] In Rome, intimacy with freeborn boys would have been even more perilous, however, since it violated what Williams has called the second "protocol of masculine behavior": both male and female freeborn Romans, with the exception of the wife, were excluded as acceptable sexual partners.[63] This would mean that pederasty, insofar as it involved sex with freeborn adolescents, would have been problematic, and it is this precise sexual phenomenon about which Romans seeking to educate their youths expressed apprehension when searching for teachers. In Rome, a physical trainer with a reputation like that of Demetrius in this poem would have fueled much anxiety. As Williams convincingly cautions, however, it is important not to draw too sharp a distinction between Greece and Rome when it comes to the practice of pederasty, because in the latter culture love for boys had a long history of acceptance before the influx of Greek influence in the second century BCE, especially in cases where non-freeborn slaves or prostitutes were the love objects. As Richlin argues, the impact of Greek culture in Rome must be considered "an augmentation" but not "the basis" of Roman pederasty, since Roman writers often relished same-sex relations with nonfreeborn youths, and they did not specify this predilection as specifically Greek.[64]

Even the fact that Demetrius held a boy who reclined "in the lap" carries erotic connotations.[65] In the erotic epigrams of the *Greek Anthology*, the

[61] On courtship, see Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 81–91; and Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella, *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty: Boys Were Their Gods* (London: Routledge, 2008), 38–62.

[62] Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 91–109. See also Lear and Cantarella, *Images*, 106–38.

[63] Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 17–19, 103–36 at 19.

[64] Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 223; and Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 15–16, 20–29, 68–84. Williams demonstrates this to be the case in a wide range of Roman sources, arguing that Roman writers suggest that "Greek influence resulted in increased licentiousness in general," which was also apparent in the rising demand for prostitutes (20). On this subject, see also Paul Veyne, "Homosexuality in Ancient Rome," in *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, ed. Philippe Ariès and André Béjin, trans. Anthony Foster (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 26–35 at 28–29. Similarly, Marlyn B. Skinner writes of "a more rigorous ethical climate surrounding pederasty" in Rome than in Greece but recognizes that Romans allowed for sexual relations with nonfreeborn boys (introduction to Hallett and Skinner, *Roman Sexualities*, 3–26, at 8 and 11). These scholars thus offer a corrective to the argument that "homosexuality" was a Greek import into Rome, as argued in Ramsay MacMullen, "Roman Attitudes to Greek Love," *Historia* 31, no. 4 (1982): 488, 491.

[65] Similarly, in [Verg.,] *Priapea* 4 the poet wonders how he has offended the god Priapus, since he failed to become erect while he lay with a boy *in sinu* (in his lap) the whole night. *Aeneid: Books 7–12. Appendix Vergiliana*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

κόλπος (lap) is highly invested with erogenic power. The lap emerges in one poem as a desirable part of the boy's body. The poet vividly imagines a beloved boy studying a scroll and pressing it under his chin, against his lips, and over his tender thighs. Addressing the scroll directly, the poet writes that "often you will visit his lap" (ὑποκόλπιον, perhaps also under or just below his lap), even daring to touch unspeakable regions. The poet develops a fantasy about the scroll, which is clearly a stand-in for the poet's erect penis.[66] The lap thus joins the boy's chin, lips, thighs, and buttocks as the erogenic zones of the boy's body, an erotic fashioning that is consistent with the later Pseudo-Lucianic *Erōtes*, which stages a debate about whether boys or women make better sexual partners. Theomnestus, who loves both women and boys, imagines the "ladder of pleasure," which proceeds from seeing the boy, to touching him with the fingertips, to increasingly passionate kissing, to "open embraces when clothed." He imagines the hand descending "down into the lap" (κατὰ κόλπου) to press the boy's exceptionally swollen breasts and heaving stomach until finally reaching the "bloom of youth." At this point, Theomnestus quotes a line from Euripides: "Why should I recapitulate the unspeakable?" He thus perhaps implies that the goal is to fondle the boy's penis.[67] In Theomnestus's "ladder" the boy's lap has erogenic power similar to that of the lips, stomach, and bloom, and it is by embracing the boy "when clothed" that the lover gains access to this eroticized adolescent body. The lap also functions as an erogenic zone in the erotic epigrams about courtesans collected in Book Five of the *Greek Anthology*. In these poems, it is in the lap that lovers long to reside, and the lap holding is bidirectional. That is, the male lover finds sensual enjoyment by being in the courtesan's lap, as in one poem, where the courtesan laments that the lamp by whose light her lover swore fidelity now shines upon him "in the lap [ἐν κόλποις] of others."[68] But it is equally common that the male lover finds enjoyment by embracing his courtesan in his own lap, as in another poem, where a courtesan laments because she sees "the [male] lover holding another [woman] in his lap [ὑποκόλπιον]."[69] In an interesting twist that dramatizes the bodily interchangeability of boy and woman, another poet writes:

[66] *GA* 12.208.

[67] Ps.-Lucian, *Erōtes* 53, quoting Eur., *Or.* 14.

[68] *GA* 5.8. Also, in *GA* 5.17 the poet σπεύδων ἡμετέρης κόλπον ἐς Εἰδοθέης (hastens to the lap of our Eidothea); in 5.25 the poet wants to go Κυδίλλης ὑποκόλπιος (into the lap of Cydilla); in 5.107 ἡμεῖς δ' ἐν κόλποις ἥμεθα Ναϊάδος (we sit in the lap of Naias); and in 5.165 the poet longs to lie ἐν κόλποισιν (in the lap) of a courtesan as a second Endymion, implying a longing for eternal rest there.

[69] *GA* 5.130. Also, in *GA* 5.136 the poet laments because he sees Heliodora ἄλλοθι κοὐ κόλποις ἡμετέροις (elsewhere and not in our lap); in 5.173 he laments that the sun rose too early ὅτε τὰν ῥαδινὰν κόλποις ἔχον (when I held the slender [courtesan Demo] in my lap); and in 5.275 a courtesan laments to her rapist, οἰχόμενος δ' ἄλλην ὑποκόλπιον εὐθὺς ἑλίξεις (going off you will at once entwine another in your lap). See the Latin equivalents in Livy 43.4 and Ov., *Her.* 3.114, where the phrase is *in sinu* (in the lap).

"By turning around the fine-hipped [female] Menophila suppose in your heart / that you hold him Menophilos as a male in your lap." It is again κόλποις (in the lap) that the lover wants to hold his beloved, and whether this was a woman or a boy hardly matters, since the former can be flipped around presumably for access to her buttocks, which in this poem serve as an erogenic body part that both boy and woman have in common.[70] Similarly, this motif appears outside the epigrams, in Plutarch's first-century *Amatorius*, where the advocate arguing for the superiority of pederasty criticizes lovers of women for whiling away their time ἐν κόλποις (in the lap) of women, which he takes as evidence for their softness and captivity to pleasure.[71] In all these texts, therefore, the lap is erotically charged from multiple directions as the sexually alluring part of the body and as the place where the lover wants to be held and in turn wants to hold the beloved. As Van Tilborg has argued, this explains why Petronius names the pederastic antihero of his vulgarly sexed mock epic the *Satyricon* Encolpius (literally, "in-the-lap man").[72] I would add to this another "in-the-lap man" named Encolpus, whom we meet in two epigrams by the first-century Roman poet Martial, in both of which he is the slave of his master, the pederast Aulus Pudens.[73] Both males are named for their erotic function, thus further highlighting the erogenic qualities of the lap. In this same direction, ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ (in the lap) or εἰς τὸν κόλπον (to the lap) appears several times in the Septuagint to denote the relationship between husband and wife.[74] Here too the lap is a body part that underlines the ideal intimacy between man and woman.[75]

The στῆθος (chest) on which the beloved reclines in John 13:25 and 21:20 also appears as an erogenic zone in erotic poetry. It is not the case, as Van Tilborg suggests, that "στῆθος has less sexual overtones than the parallel word κόλπος."[76] The chest also names a bodily sector affected by burning love, as in one of the erotic epigrams in the *Greek Anthology*, where the poet describes a guest sick with boy love heaving a troublesome breath "through his chest" (διὰ στηθέων). In an earlier text the lyric poet

[70] *GA* 5.116. For the buttocks as sexually alluring regardless of whether they belong to a male or female, see Ps.-Lucian, *Erōtes* 13; also Halperin, *History of Homosexuality*, 97–98.

[71] Plut., *Amat.* 751A.

[72] Van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love*, 90–91.

[73] Mart. 1.31, 5.48. For a discussion, see Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 79, 343n59.

[74] See Deut 13:7, 28:54, 28:56 (LXX); 2 Kgdms 12:8 (LXX); Sir 9:1; also see Abraham and Hagar in Gen 16:5 (LXX). See also Plut., *Quaest. Conv.* 655A. This passage refers to Homer's *Iliad*, where Paris is said to have snuck off εἰς τοὺς κόλπους (to the lap) of his wife. This reflects poorly on his character in contrast to the other heroes, who never "recline" during the day with their wives or concubines. Homer is thus understood to support the contention that it is an immoderate act to make love during the day. Similarly, in Plut., *Quaest. Conv.* 742D, fleeing battle εἰς τοὺς κόλπους (to the lap) of the wife is criticized.

[75] See Van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love*, 89. Tilborg perhaps goes too far in writing of "marital sexual relations."

[76] Van Tilborg, 90.

Sappho similarly describes the physiological effects of love for a man who "excited the heart in the chest [ἐν στήθεσιν]."[77] Moreover, poets express the desire to be held upon the chest of the courtesan. For example, one poet fantasizes being entwined "naked limbs with naked limbs" and writes: "Let chests [στήθεα] be yoked and lips!"[78] Sappho shares this erogenic picture in a fragment addressed to an unknown reader: "May you sleep on the chest [ἐν στήθεσιν] of a tender [female] companion."[79] This longing to lie on the woman's chest may be in part motivated by the fact that the στῆθος repeatedly surfaces as a key feature of overall female beauty alongside the skin, hair, lips, and eyes.[80] The chest is thus as erotically charged as the lap, though it does seem to be the case that these poets more often view the chest as an erotic zone in relationships between men and women than between men and adolescents.

To be sure, while any man and youth might engage in a pederastic relationship in both Rome and Greece, it often arises between teachers and students.[81] It was the teacher lovers (the men Juvenal ridiculed) whom Roman writers feared when seeking to educate their freeborn sons. Lap holding functions to characterize this pedagogical subtype of pederasty in Plato's *Symposium*, a renowned text from classical Athens from the early fourth century BCE that had a long afterlife beyond the first century CE and influenced early Christian literature.[82] The dialogue opens during the dinner before the drinking begins. Plato gives special attention to the guests who "were reclining" two to a couch. Initially, Socrates reclines as

[77] *GA* 12.134; Sappho frag. 31, in *Greek Lyric: Sappho and Alcaeus*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). For the currency of this poem in the first century CE, see Plut., *Amat.* 763A.

[78] *GA* 5.252. See *GA* 5.84, where the poet wishes he were a rose so that the courtesan would pluck and hold him στήθεσι χιονέοις (to her snowy chest).

[79] Frag. 126. For an interpretation of this fragment in the context of Sappho's surviving oeuvre and in light of her reputation for homoeroticism in antiquity, see Anne L. Klinck, "'Sleeping in the Bosom of a Tender Companion': Homoerotic Attachments in Sappho," in *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West*, ed. Beert C. Verstraete and Vernon Provencal (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2005), 193–208.

[80] *GA* 5.48, 83, 270.

[81] On pederasty in the Greco-Roman world more generally, see Richlin, *Garden of Priapus*, 34–56, 220–26; and Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 20–29.

[82] Kenneth Dover dates the dialogue to 384–79 (Plato, *Symposium*, ed. Dover [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980], 10). C. J. Rowe considers the afterlife of this text in later antiquity (*Plato: "Symposium," Edited with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* [Warminster: Aris & Philips, 1998], 11). I would add several writers from later antiquity, especially Plut., *Amat.* 749A, 751D, 748D–E, 762A, 760B, 763F, 764A–767A; *Quaest. Conv.* 1.612E, 6.686B; Ps.-Lucian, *Erōtes*, 49, 54; and Maximus of Tyre, *Orations*, 18–21. For an early Christian text modeled on Plato's *Symposium*, see Methodius's *Symposium*; for the early Christian reception of the literary symposium, including Plato's, see Jason König, *Saints and Symposiasts: The Literature of Food and the Symposium in Greco-Roman and Early Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

the inside partner to Agathon's right.[83] As the text unfolds and they turn to drinking, the flirtatious repartee heightens when the drunken Alcibiades bursts into the symposium. Everyone implores Alcibiades "to recline," and Agathon invites him to share his own couch. Socrates reclines on the inside and makes room for Alcibiades, who proceeds "to sit alongside Agathon in the middle of Socrates and Agathon." Alcibiades then details his concerted but failed effort to seduce Socrates, whom he praises in a lengthy speech. Confident in his own good looks and well aware that Socrates "is disposed erotically toward fine looking youths," Alcibiades presumes he will easily seduce Socrates.[84] But it proves so difficult that Alcibiades finds himself in a reversal of roles; though the young pupil, he must act as the lover to entice Socrates the elder teacher. Alcibiades invites him "to dine together," and after the second meal, with no one else present, he persuades Socrates to stay the night. Alcibiades underlines the importance of the reclining arrangements: "He took his rest on the couch close to mine, the one on which he took his dinner."[85] Unabashedly calling Socrates his only worthy lover, expressing his desire to become the best he can be under his tutelage, and offering to share his possessions and friends, Alcibiades makes his final move by maneuvering himself onto Socrates's couch and making Socrates his inside reclining lap partner: "Then standing up, not allowing him to say anything else, throwing my cloak around him (for it was winter), reclining under the garment of this man here, throwing both hands around him, so truly divine and wonderful, I lay down the whole night."[86] This was all to no avail. The impeccably chaste Socrates snuggled the youths for whom he professed love. He even consented to recline two to a couch as the inside partner and to spend the night thus cozied in a younger man's embrace. But Alcibiades wants it to be known that Socrates sought no favors. This particular scene gains a lot of traction in later antique receptions, especially in jokes implying that there is no possible way Socrates merely lay there and slept. Alcibiades and Socrates were thus characterized as a known pederastic pair.[87]

Lap Holding in Literary Depictions of Banquets: Summary of Results

As the foregoing analysis of lap holding in the literature depicting reclining at banquets has shown, in almost every instance that I have found, writers

[83] Pl., *Symp.* 175d–176a. That Socrates takes the inside position to Agathon's right is verified in 177d. Eryximachus proposes that each person speak in turn ἐπὶ δεξιά (to the right); accordingly, Socrates speaks last after Agathon, since he is positioned to his right (see 222e).

[84] Pl., *Symp.* 216d.

[85] Pl., *Symp.* 217c–d.

[86] Pl., *Symp.* 219b; Van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love*, 81. Van Tilborg draws attention to this passage but does not track references to this in later antiquity.

[87] See, for example, Lucian, *Vit. auct.* 15; *Ver. hist.* 2.17–19; *De mort. Peregr.* 43; Ps.-Lucian, *Erōtes* 49, 54; Diog. Laert. 2.23, 2.28; Maximus of Tyre, *Orations* 18.4–6, 9; and Epictetus, *Dissertations* 2.18.22. On Alcibiades's penchant for reclining under the same cloak with his love interests, see Lys., *Against Alcibiades I* 25.

deploy lap holding during dinner as part of a description of couples whose relationship moves beyond mere homosocial friendship and is inflected with erotic desire, romance, and sexual implication. It is certainly not coincidental that the highest concentration of examples appears in the Greek erotic epigrams. To be sure, friends or family members also share couches sociably and intimately in Greco-Roman literature without there being anything erotic about it. Indeed, males may have reclined in the laps of their friends, snuggled up to them, or rested their heads on their chests without necessarily desiring to be their lovers. But in these cases, couch sharing is depicted without reference to laps or chests.[88]

When we narrow the focus to texts that specifically depict lap holding, as I have done here, the posture repeatedly functions as a set literary or rhetorical topos to portray various types of lovers. It usually occurs as one among the many details that eroticize couch-sharing pairs, making the fact that they are lovers abundantly clear, including sometimes rather elaborate descriptions of their dress, hygiene, comportment, sexual preferences, and erotic habits, as in the examples from Dio Cassius, Juvenal, Aulus Gellius, Cicero, Automedon, the poets of the Greek epigrams, and Plato. In some cases, though, lap holding occurs alongside less elaborate details that are possibly, though not conclusively, suggestive of sexual practice, as is the case in Pliny and Plutarch. In Suetonius, Dolabella only needed six Latin words, with one reference to the interior reclining position, in order to malign Caesar for playing passive to Nicomedes; he is maligned simply as "the queen's rival, the inner partner of the royal litter."[89]

Lap holding, moreover, was at the same time a culturally unstable act in the Greco-Roman world. Depending on the specific context, a writer in this period might press lap holding into positive or negative service. Dio Cassius, Juvenal, a host of Roman orators, and other writers surveyed above use lap holding during dinner as one among many sure signs that the outside partner was properly Priapic while the inside lap partner was effeminate, perhaps a *cinaedus*. In contrast, Automedon, like the other poets of the Greek epigrams, and Plato deploy lap holding to characterize a pederastic couple, either to fantasize about intimacy and sex, as with the poets, or to dramatize philosophical eros and the ideal of self-control, as with Plato's Socrates.[90] In this literature, lap holding might be mocked,

[88] To grasp the flavor of intimate couch sharing between friends and family more generally, without reference to laps or chests, see, among countless examples, Xen., *Symp.* 3.13; Achilles Tatius 1.5; and Plut., *Cat. Min.* 37. Writers typically express couch sharing between friends with a variety of bland prepositions such as παρά (alongside), μετά (with), ὑπέρ (above), πλησίον (near), or σύν (with) (for the latter, see John 12:2).

[89] Suet., *Iul.* 49.1.

[90] For the culturally unstable interpretation of these relationships, see Diogenes Laertius's portrayal of the Platonist Arcesilaus. From one perspective his erotic relationships with his teachers and pupils make him an ideal candidate for headship of the Academy, since by virtue of these relationships he can faithfully replicate the ideas and habits of his teachers for conveyance to the next generation. But at the same time these relationships open him up to the

parodied, and sneeringly deployed in the context of a brutally competitive rhetorical world; at the same time, it might be embraced as an expression of eros, as well as a highly desirable form of intimacy in itself.

Interpreting Lap Holding in the Gospel According to John

With the broader literary context now in view, it is time to take another look at the Gospel According to John, where the disciple "whom Jesus loved" (ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς) reclines "in the lap" (ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ) and "on the chest" (ἐπὶ τὸ στῆθος) during dinner (13:23, 13:25, 21:10). What should these details be taken to mean? What kind of relationship is this? Appropriate attention should first be given to the fact that this posture mirrors the one described in 1:18, where Jesus is "the one who is in [or turned toward] the lap [εἰς τὸν κόλπον] of the Father."[91] The phrase denotes closeness that is expressive especially of Jesus's relationship with God the Father as "the Logos with God" in 1:1. Alicia D. Myers emphasizes breastfeeding and identity formation in her interpretation of 1:18, where the lap, which is not used in 1:18 in the context of dining and reclining, can be plausibly interpreted in connection with the procreational terminology that predominates throughout the Prologue, including, as she underlines, terms like λόγος (Word), "flesh," "blood," and "begotten" and, later in John's text, πνεῦμα (spirit).[92] The Father thus displaces Mary, who is absent from the Prologue and kept at a distance throughout John's account (2:1–12, 19:25–27). Myers goes on to take the analogy between 1:18 and 13:23 as justification for her claim that Jesus in 13:23 symbolically plays the role of the mother or nurse of the beloved disciple. Jesus thus loves and nourishes the beloved as a mother does her child and as God the Father does Jesus in 1:18. Moreover, Jesus is portrayed throughout John as one who rebirths and rears his followers (1:13, 3:7–9, 6:48–58, 7:37–38, 20:22).[93] This interpretation of 13:23 draws attention to the metaphorical value of breastfeeding for pedagogy. This educative dimension is no doubt in play in 13:23, 13:25, and 21:20. But the parallels I have adduced suggest that at least part of the interpretative task for these verses must also be to decipher

accusation of the Stoic Ariston of Chios, who calls Arcesilaus a "corrupter of the youth and teacher of *cinaedia*." Diogenes himself even has to admit that Arcesilaus is overly "fond of boys" (Diog. Laert. 4.40–41).

[91] In several usages εἰς τὸν κόλπον denotes movement toward (toward the lap); see Luke 16:22; Gen 16:5 (LXX); Num 11:12 (LXX); Ruth 4:16 (LXX); Luke 6:38; *GA*, 5.17; Plut., *Quaest. Conv.* 655A. These examples corroborate Francis J. Moloney's argument that the phrase in 1:18 emphasizes Jesus's being turned toward the Father during his lifetime, which in turn enabled him to "explain" (ἐξηγήσατο) ("'In the Bosom of' or 'Turned towards' the Father?," *Australian Biblical Review* 31 [1983]: 63–71).

[92] Myers, *Blessed among Women*, 43–76.

[93] Myers, "'In the Father's Bosom,'" 481–97; Myers, *Blessed among Women*, 77–108.

the problematics of sex and eros as they play out in this relationship.[94] The collection of examples analyzed here should make it abundantly clear that the question of eros and sex is one with which interpreters of John need to grapple more adequately.

It is important to emphasize that my claim about the problem of sex and eros is directed toward the author's literary portrayal of Jesus and the beloved and not toward the historical Jesus. It is the demonstrable literary culture of John's text that is at the forefront of this argument and not the material and social culture of early first-century Palestine.[95] The exact location of the composition of John's gospel is unknown, but scholars reasonably posit an eastern Hellenized urban center. Options include Ephesus, in line with the earliest testimonies; Alexandria, given this text's popularity there in the second century; or Antioch, due in part to the use of Johannine language and terminology in the early second-century writings of Ignatius of Antioch.[96] It is also becoming increasingly clear how deeply embedded this author is in Greco-Roman literary culture. As many have argued, the author evinces knowledge of Greco-Roman consolation literature, biography, tragic drama and theatrical conventions, philosophy, and medical literature, especially theories of conception, generation, and childbirth.[97] Most relevant here is the author's familiarity with the literary symposium. George L. Parsenios identifies several figures and circumstances in the Johannine Farewell Discourses (13–17) that typify this genre. Talk, for example, turns eventually to love and friendship (13:34–35, 15:9–17), thus emphasizing the sociability of the dinner, a theme that is heightened

[94] Myers notes that the breastfeeding in 13:23 is "admittedly implicit" (*Blessed among Women*, 94). The image of reclining in the lap should not be taken to be univocal. See Myers's methodological reflections on "audience criticism" (13–15). I agree with Myers about the pedagogical dimension of this relationship, since, as I explore below, lap holding contained elements of nurturing and character shaping.

[95] It is methodologically advisable to set aside the impulse to question how this act of lap holding squares or does not square with Jesus's teachings, what his life was about, and how it played out against or in tune with his contemporaries. Answering these questions would require separate analysis. For recent developments in assessing the Gospel According to John's historical value, see Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher, eds., *John, Jesus, and History*, 3 vols. (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2007–16).

[96] For a recent review of the scholarship, see Esther Kobel, *Dining with John: Communal Meals and Identity Formation in the Fourth Gospel and Its Historical and Cultural Context*, Biblical Interpretation Series 109 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 18–20.

[97] Paul A. Holloway, "Left Behind: Jesus' Consolation of His Disciples in John 13, 31–17,26," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 96, no. 1 (2005): 1–34; Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (1992; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 213–32; Jo-Ann A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004); George Parsenios, *Rhetoric and Drama in the Johannine Lawsuit Motif*, WUNT 258 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Myers, *Blessed among Women*, 18–74.

by the contrast with enmity (15:18–16:4). Indeed, the discourses can only get under way after the stock figure of the offended guest, Judas, departs (13:18, 13:27–30), thus leaving love, bonding, and sociability to blossom. Most importantly, in keeping with philosophical symposia, the feast here constitutes a feast of words, as Jesus and his disciples hold discussions that unfold over the course of several chapters. While this is not enough to constitute a literary symposium proper, Parsenios argues, it is sufficient for establishing "loose but discernable connections" with this genre.[98] Parsenios, however, overlooks that lap holding is an important part of the literary symposium. It should be taken to be among the other banqueting motifs that he highlights. In his analysis of the stock figures of this genre, Josef Martin notes that there is commonly a loving couple. Applying Martin's categories to John leaves little doubt that Jesus and the beloved assume this role.[99] The literary environment and geographical location of the Gospel According to John thus place it well within contemporary Greco-Roman literature, including literary accounts of symposia. This renders the examples I have cataloged above relevant and indeed pressing for interpreting Jesus and the beloved as another lap-holding pair.

It is thus reasonable to turn to the hermeneutics of eros and sex in an attempt to describe what kind of relationship this lap-holding couple should be taken to have. The historicist commitments of my analysis take seriously the possibility that the practice or experience of relational subjectivity being described is wholly other or, in Alan Bray's words, almost "untranslatable into modern terms."[100]

The first example of this untranslatability is the fact that the lap holding during dinner appears to be the author's way of signaling that Jesus and the beloved disciple are a pair of friends set apart from other friends. The author has other ways of describing how Jesus was dining with males in a friendly and sociable spirit. Lazarus, for example, whom the author of John explicitly claims Jesus to have also loved (11:5, 11:11, 11:35), appears merely as "one of those reclining with him" during an earlier dinner (12:2), which assumes friendship and the kind of male bonding that ideally thrived at the banquet. The same holds true for Jesus's relationship with Peter, who is also reclining at the dinner, where he plays an even larger role than the beloved disciple (13:6–9, 13:24, 13:36–38). Jesus washes Peter's feet along with the other disciples (13:5–9), all of whom thus receive a certain kind of intimate touch from their teacher, just as Jesus readily speaks in their presence of love and friendship and declares his love for all of them

[98] Parsenios, *Departure and Consolation*, 111–50 at 113. Kobel treats both the literary and sociocultural issues and helpfully analyzes John's other meal scenes (*Dining with John*, 69–110, 173–214, 251–300).

[99] Josef Martin, *Symposion: Die Geschichte einer literarischen Form* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1931), 33–115.

[100] Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 40.

(13:1, 13:34–35, 15:9–17). But, as I have underlined, all this is consistent with the modes of description of Greek writers, who everywhere describe couch sharing and communal reclining and dining among friends but seem most often to reserve lap holding specifically for love relationships that are distinct from other loves.

Tracing this story after the beloved's introduction in 13:23 confirms the privileged status of their relationship. Lap holding is only one among many clues that this love is special. That the beloved is reclining in the lap (13:23) and on the chest (13:25) positions him to ask Jesus at Peter's prompting (13:24) to identify the betrayer whom Jesus has foretold (13:21). The beloved's repose with Jesus allows for a hushed verbal exchange in 13:25–26 to which the beloved alone remains privy. His special access to the teacher elevates his standing as a trustworthy source of knowledge and positions him, even if he does not understand this statement about Judas's betrayal in the moment (13:28), to carry the story forward accurately in the future.

The final reference at the end of the gospel to the disciple "whom Jesus loved" recalls his couch repose "on the chest" (21:20). The physical contact of the pair on the couch is emphasized in both the first and last appearances of the beloved. Unlike Peter, for whom Jesus foretells a martyr's death (21:18–19), the beloved, Jesus predicts, will live for a long time: "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?" (21:22). Despite his anonymity throughout the gospel, the beloved's identity was purportedly known to a group called "the brothers," among whom a rumor circulated that he would live until the Lord's return at the eschaton (21:23).[101] But the narrator offers a corrective interpretation, emphasizing the rumor's contingent nature ("if I want him to remain"). This implies that the beloved might or will have already died before Jesus returns. Moreover, his presence ("to remain") might take some form other than physical life. What form this might take becomes clear when the narrator credits none other than the beloved as the author of the narrative: "This is the disciple who bore witness about these things and who wrote them" (21:24).[102] Framing the beloved's relationship with Jesus as an exceptional one thus legitimates him

[101] For overviews of various attempts to identify the beloved, with ample documentation of the prolific secondary literature, see Harold W. Attridge, "The Restless Quest for the Beloved Disciple," in *Early Christian Voices in Texts, Traditions, and Symbols: Essays in Honor of François Bovon*, ed. David H. Warren, Ann Graham Brock, and David W. Pao (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 71–82. Attridge underlines the playful studied anonymity of this figure throughout the text. See also R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 72–85.

[102] How to understand this is far from certain. Whether "these things" refer to chapter 21 only or also to 1–20, whether the beloved wrote the whole gospel or only some parts of it, or whether he serves simply as an authentic or pseudepigraphical legitimating witness for another author and later editors cannot be determined here. As Culpepper writes, "In any interpretation of the ending of the Gospel, the author attributed a prior and formative role to the Beloved Disciple. What stands written in the Gospel owes its origin, definition, and authority to the Beloved Disciple" (*Son of Zebedee*, 71).

as the one best placed to impart his lover's legacy to the future as the author of this text.[103] The narrator thus portrays this story as having its origin in their relationship, which constitutes a love apart from other loves. This in turn enhances the prestige of the text: it comes from the one who had a special love relationship with Jesus.

In his lives of the ancient philosophers, Diogenes Laertius, writing in the third century CE, portrays some transfers of leadership in Plato's Academy as occurring between pairs of teacher/student lovers, as Van Tilborg has detailed. The beloved follows the lover as the head of the Platonist school when Polemo follows Xenocrates and Crates Polemo. Diogenes emphasizes the love and closeness of these pairs, whose love is set apart from other loves. He evokes the topos that friends share all things in common, including pursuits, breath, a tomb, meals, and houses. This qualifies the beloved pupils Polemo and Crates to play successor to their teacher lovers Xenocrates and Polemo, since they are able to replicate their lovers' ways of life with insiders' access to their minds. This relationship unfolds in accordance with the Platonist theory of love, which prioritizes love's power for solidifying friendship "from habitual intimacy."[104] The fact that these students and teachers are couples functions to extend the school's homogeneity to successive generations and invests the beloved students with the character and knowledge needed to carry their lovers' teachings into the future.

This is not an isolated phenomenon. In Persius's *Satire* 5, the poet similarly writes lovingly of his teacher Cornutus, to whom the poet recalls entrusting himself as into the "Socratic lap" (*Socraticus sinus*) at a ripe age. He goes on to emphasize their intimacy, their long days together, and the evenings they spent dining in leisure. With Cornutus assuming the role of teacher, adoptive father, and "sweet friend," the poet recalls all that he learned from their shared life together as a pair bonded in harmony. It is from their shared intimacy that Cornutus was able to shape the poet who internalized his lessons and allowed his way of life to be formed by Cornutus's example.[105]

This brand of habitual intimacy characterizes the beloved's relationship with Jesus throughout the gospel. In the closing chapters the beloved is repeatedly present as an eye-witness of key events: the trial (18:15), crucifixion (19:26), empty tomb (20:3–5), and resurrection appearance (21:7). If the unnamed disciple in 1:35–40 constitutes another reference to the beloved, which is likely, then from the very beginning of the story

[103] For the authorizing function of the beloved in John, see Marvin Meyer, "Whom Did Jesus Love Most? Beloved Disciples in John and Other Gospels," in *The Legacy of John: Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Tuomas Rasimus (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 73–91; Attridge, "Genre Bending," 19–21; also Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 83.

[104] Diog. Laert. 3.81, 4.19, 4.21, 4.22; Van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love*, 85–86.

[105] Pers. 5.30–51.

this disciple has intimately shared in Jesus's life, even "staying with him" in his lodgings as early as 1:39. Importantly, in 19:26–27 Jesus instructs the beloved as though he were his inheritor to protect his mother, Mary, and the disciple complies, taking responsibility over her well-being, which strikes undertones of kinship and family.[106] Their love and time together position the beloved to become an important interpreter of the life and teaching of Jesus to followers in future epochs. This makes it plausible that the beloved is to be identified as "the one who has seen" and whose "true witness" is cited as the source of the text in 19:35.[107] This disciple, moreover, repeatedly outperforms Peter, which implies the former's superiority, even if the authority of Peter is in the end affirmed (20:2–7, 21:7).

If lap holding is part of an overall characterization of this relationship that surpasses other loves, then what is it about this love between Jesus and the beloved disciple that distinguishes it? Moving a step further into the hermeneutics of sex and eros, their relationship might be minimally described as "affectionate" or "intimate" male love. To employ the words of Amy Richlin as she grapples with the same problem in trying to characterize the love between another pedagogical pair, Marcus Aurelius and Fronto, it might also be called "sentimental friendship." As Richlin recognizes, the experience of friendship and expectations about it have taken numerous forms throughout history: there have been debates about whether it should be public or private; about its connection with notions of family, kinship, and marriage; and about the intensity of its expressions of devotion, both verbal and physical.[108] Richlin seeks to carve out a relational category for Marcus and Fronto that she describes as comprising "romantic mutual devotion but not necessarily physical expression." For Richlin, this warrants the claim that Marcus and Fronto were "lovers."[109]

Similarly, the inner logic of the Johannine portrayal of Jesus and his beloved justifies the argument that they inhabited the relational space of a "sentimental friendship," elevating this loving couple above other loves

[106] Not without good cause does Alan Bray cite John 19:26–27 in his interpretation of sworn brotherhoods in medieval and Renaissance England as an epigram to chapter 3, "Families and Friends" (*The Friend*, 78).

[107] Close comparison of 19:35 with 21:24 also points to the beloved as the witness. For discussion of these issues, see Attridge, "Genre Bending," 19n36; Brown, *Gospel According to John*, 2:936–37; Barrett, *Gospel According to Saint John*, 557; Culpepper, *Son of Zebedee*, 65–66; and Van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love*, 96–101.

[108] Richlin, *Marcus Aurelius in Love*, 6. She draws on the work of Bray, *The Friend*; Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow, 1998); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, 2nd ed. (2016; repr., New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). For a more recent account, see David Konstan, *In the Orbit of Love: Affection in Ancient Greece and Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[109] Richlin, *Marcus Aurelius in Love*, 6.

in ways similar to the semiotics of lap holding in the other texts I have analyzed. Taking the argument further, I do not think that I am pushing the evidence too far to follow Richlin's example by positing that the "sentimental friendship" between Jesus and his beloved should be interpreted as involving "romantic mutual devotion." That is to say, as in almost all of the examples above, where lovers desire to hold each other in the lap, there is a dimension of eros inflecting John's statement that the disciple in the lap is "the one whom Jesus loved" (ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς) (13:23).

John's deployment of the verb ἀγαπᾶν (to love) here is consistent with the terminology for love throughout the gospel, where the term ἔρως (love or erotic love) or cognates never appear. This holds true for the whole corpus of New Testament writers, whose lexicon of love is shaped by the Septuagint, where the verb ἐρᾶν (to love or to love erotically) rarely occurs in favor of the predominant use of ἀγαπᾶν (to love) and its cognates, even, for example, in translating an overtly erotic text like the Song of Songs. The author of John also employs the verb φιλεῖν (to love) without making any discernible difference between ἀγαπᾶν and φιλεῖν, which alternate throughout the text (5:20, 11:3, 11:11, 15:13–15, 16:27, 21:15–21). The use of ἀγαπᾶν (to love) cannot predetermine that eros should be excluded. Robert Joly has refuted the argument that Christian writers chose ἀγαπᾶν and cognates in order to remove erotic feeling from what they took to be authentic, that is, nonerotic Christian love. Joly convincingly argues that these terms had context-dependent meanings.[110] The precise inflection of the love that ἀγαπᾶν (to love) expresses should be determined through contextual exegesis. In this regard, Greek authors readily employ ἀγαπᾶν in contexts where eros predominates.[111] One telling example for the present argument appears in the writing of the second-century author Lucian of Samosata. The goddess Hera complains to her husband, Zeus, a god repeatedly smitten with mortal women, that he has again found another Danae, one of Zeus's mortal lovers whom he seduced by turning into a shower of gold and falling through the roof of her chamber. Tormented "by love" (ὑπὸ τοῦ ἔρωτος), Hera remarks, Zeus will assuredly turn into a shower of gold and fall "into the lap of the beloved" (εἰς τὸν κόλπον τῆς ἀγαπωμένης).[112] When the author of John describes Jesus's disciple reclining

[110] Robert Joly, *Le vocabulaire chrétien de l'amour est-il original? Philein et agapan dans le grec antique* (Brussels: Presses universitaires de Bruxelles, 1968). Joly successfully dismantles the earlier and now outdated view of Ceslaus Spicq that the Christian usage of ἀγαπᾶν necessarily precludes irrational eros.

[111] Boswell collected an impressive number of examples demonstrating the "relative fungibility of the terms" (*Same-Sex Unions*, 6n4); for additional examples, see Sappho, frag. 132; Pl., *Symp.* 180b; [Dem.,] *Eroticus* 6, 30 (Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 50); *GA* 5.51; Plut., *Amat.* 765D, 766A; Ps.-Lucian, *Erōtes*, 54; and Eunap., *VS* 502–3.

[112] Lucian, *Iup. trag.* 2. See Lucian, *Timon* 41 for a similar reference to the κόλποι of a virgin ready to receive her lover like Danae Zeus. See also Lucian, *Dialogi marini* 12 (319). In this text Danae receives Zeus as golden rain (ἐς τὸν κόλπον) and becomes pregnant as a result.

in the lap during dinner as "the one whom Jesus loved" (ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς), this would be a legitimate way to say "loved erotically" and can be taken to express romantic devotion in light of both the other textual clues in the Johannine text and the newly collected evidence of lap holding in the literature of the reclining banquet.

Jesus and the beloved would thus join many other pairs of teacher/disciple lovers, including, as Richlin suggests, Fronto and his pupil Marcus. Diogenes Laertius also records many such couples using the terminology of eros; though drawing on earlier sources, his *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* from the third century CE exemplifies the numerous stories about philosophers and their beloved pupils circulating in later antiquity (which is not to claim that they are historically reliable). Socrates is reported not only "to have loved" Alcibiades but himself to have been his teacher Archelaus's "favorite" or "darling," just as Eudoxus was Theomedon's and the eunuch and tyrant Hermias Aristotle's.[113] Similarly, Xenophon is said "to have loved" Clinias; Plato loved his disciples Aster, Dion, Phaedrus, and Alexis; Xenocrates loved Polemo, his most industrious student; Polemo loved Crates; and Arcesilaus loved Demetrius and Cleochares.[114] Still more, Crantor is said "to have been erotically disposed" toward his student Arcesilaus; Theophrastus, toward Aristotle's son Nicomachus, his student; and Zeno, toward Chremonides. When once sitting by him, Zeno suddenly stood, quipping that he needed to cure an inflammation.[115] It is not a big step from such stories to the Romans' worry, which I have described above, about protecting their citizen sons from predatory teachers. Such pairs also are the target of Juvenal's parody of effeminate philosophers whom Juvenal accuses of desiring to play the passive role in sex with their students.

To claim "mutual romantic devotion" for Jesus and the beloved, therefore, is to invest their relationship with eros—with a longing and desire for one another, for time together, and even for physical contact such as lap holding. In the culture of the day, this distinguished their love from other loves, and for these teacher/student pairs, it was eros that rendered the pedagogical relationship most effective.

Finally, we must consider the dimension of Richlin's "sentimental friendship" that proves the most controversial and elusive: the question of physical expression. To be specific, Richlin writes of romantic devotion "but not necessarily physical expression," which wisely and carefully leaves the door open for a physical relationship without necessitating it. So much is clear from John's text, where such expression takes the form of lap holding, an erotically inflected posture, as I have shown. We are thus on stronger ground in this regard with Jesus and the beloved than Richlin is with Marcus and Fronto, who were writing letters and were thus physically separated.

[113] Diog. Laert. 2.19, 2.23, 5.3, 8.86.
[114] Diog. Laert. 2.49, 3.29–30, 3.31, 4.19, 4.21, 4.41.
[115] Diog. Laert. 4.29, 5.39, 7.17.

What is really at issue in our analysis of physical expression is the question of sex. In his discussion of pederasty as an ancient sexual practice, Halperin argues that couples whose characterization unfolds according to this particular discursive model typically have sexual relations, as the case of the trainer Demetrius exemplifies. But Halperin adds the caveat that this is "mostly" the case. This is judicious in light of a figure like Plato's Socrates, who snuggles the entire night in the lap of Alcibiades but refrains from sex despite Alcibiades's invitation.[116] Socrates's abstinence and mastery over sexual urges come under suspicion in later writers, who harbor doubts that Socrates could have resisted. In this vein, Juvenal ridicules philosophers and teachers, arguing that their supposed sexual abstention merely masks their desire to be penetrated. On the other hand, Halperin distinguishes pederasty, which is a hierarchical relationship between old and young or teacher and student, from intense male friendship and love, which emphasize the equality, similarity, and mutuality of the intimate pair. Though sentimental friendship allows for expressive passion and devotion, it by no means necessarily entails sexual contact. Nonetheless, as the evidence I have analyzed demonstrates and as Halperin recognizes, at the very least intimate friendships open the friends up to having contemporaries interpret their relationship in sexual terms. At the same time, Halperin argues, any particular pair of intimate male friends may in some cases very well have appealed to the prestige of intense friendship to cover up their sexual activities.[117] This complexity is all in play in the evidence examined here and helps to explain the instability and dissonance in the sources.

What we have in the Gospel According to John is a representation of a couple that refuses a precise analysis of their sexual activities or desires. Jesus and his beloved can plausibly be analyzed as a couple in terms of both pedagogical pederasty (that is, in hierarchical terms) and intimate male friendship (that is, in terms of the mutuality of a shared life). At the same time, pederastic couples in the ancient world have sex and refrain from sex, and intimate male friendships could be expressed as passionate mutual love with or without benefits. All depends on the couple. In the absence of further direct evidence about the relationship between Jesus and the beloved, the author of John's portrayal of them does not address whether they had sex or not or wanted to have sex but refrained.

One can only go so far, therefore, as one tries to analyze in detail the relational lives of these ancient subjects and the way that their sexual acts are portrayed in writing. But the available evidence makes it reasonable to posit that the relationship between Jesus and his beloved was a sentimental student/teacher friendship; it most likely contained mutual romantic devotion, intimate passion, and physical expression, at least in the lap. Intimate male relationships do not necessarily imply sexual contact, yet the friendships

[116] Halperin, *History of Homosexuality*, 113–17.
[117] Halperin, 117–21.

of certain male pairs who privilege their relationships above other forms of homosocial affiliation were by no means devoid of eros, passion, and romance. This (to us) somewhat paradoxical conclusion means that the author of John embraces, whether inadvertently or consciously, an image of intense male student/teacher love, devotion, and friendship in a cultural context where some writers were virulently ridiculing such pairs.[118] But with regard to genital sex or some form of consummation we simply do not know. Lap holding by itself, and even alongside the other contextual clues, leaves interpreters in the dark. If sex between Jesus and the beloved is nowhere disavowed in this text, then it is also nowhere explicitly portrayed.

In the end, even straining historicist powers of analysis to their utmost, this brand of hermeneutics betrays a certain kind of inevitable embeddedness in a particular discursive regime. Following Michel Foucault, we remain Victorians who feel the need to speak of and tirelessly analyze other people's love and sex.[119] For the author of John, matters were considerably simpler. Jesus had one special friend, whom he held in his lap while reclining at dinner. He loved him. This is why this friend, who wrote the text, knows so much.

About the Author

Jeff Jay is a lecturer in New Testament and early Christian literature at the University of Chicago, teaching in the Divinity School and in the humanities core in the College. His research focuses on early Jewish and Christian texts and their context in Second Temple Judaism and Greco-Roman culture. He is the author of *The Tragic in Mark* (2014). His work has appeared in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, the *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, and *Ancient Judaism*, among other places.

[118] John's portrayal would thus dramatize the kind of dissidence that Masterson forefronts in his analysis of manhood in antiquity. See "Studies of Ancient Masculinity," 17–30.

[119] The allusion is to the first part of Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 1:9–22.