

Equal to God: Jesus's Crucifixion as *Scheintod*

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Abstract:

John's Gospel depicts Jesus as simultaneously fleshly and divine. Nowhere is this clearer than in the moment of his crucifixion, where Jesus's physical body is lifted up and glorified. I argue that his crucifixion—and notably, his survival—establishes firmly Jesus's divinity. In comparing Jesus's sacrificial death on the cross to the sacrificial *Scheintoten* ("apparent deaths") of the Greek romances, I propose that Jesus's death and his escape from it work within the Gospel to establish his divinity. The protagonists of the novels appear to die and at the same time are taken as deities by those whom they encounter, even by their own romantic partners. In narrative, these deaths appear real; their loved ones behave and react to a narratively real death, and for a time, even the reader mourns for the character. *Scheintoten* point to the divinity of the heroines, since ordinary people are incapable of returning from the dead. Likewise, the moment of Jesus's death in John is left unarticulated, creating a similar instant of unreality in the narrative in which Jesus's death both occurs and is survived, signifying his divinity. Reading Jesus's survival of his crucifixion within the literary framework of *Scheintod* presents Jesus's divinity—and John's christology—as participating in the idea-world of the ancient Mediterranean, an approach which illuminates the function of Jesus's death in John.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In [John 19:30](#), Jesus dies. Eight verses later, he is buried. In [John 20](#), Mary Magdalene finds that Jesus's tomb is empty and that the body is gone; in [20:13–17](#), Jesus shows himself to Mary, no longer dead, but alive. As the present collection of essays demonstrates, the Gospel of John is far from the only ancient Mediterranean text to be concerned with coming back to life after death. The Hellenistic romance novels, popular around the same time as John's composition,¹ consistently rely on the trope of *Scheintod*, or apparent death. In the novels, the protagonists are repeatedly killed, and yet remain alive. Reading Jesus's survival of his crucifixion within the literary framework of *Scheintod* presents Jesus's divinity—and John's Christology—as participating in the idea world of the ancient Mediterranean, an approach which illuminates the function of Jesus's death in John. As such, and acknowledging that John was likely written before some of the novels discussed here, I do not argue for a direct relationship among these texts, but rather I suggest that John and the novels preserve certain expectations about what it means to return from death, or to appear to do so. Like the Greek romance novels, John's Gospel is preoccupied with the

¹ John likely dates from between 90–125 CE; the earliest of the four romance novels treated here, Chariton's *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, dates from the early first century CE (Reardon 2008, 17). *An Ephesian Tale* is dated to the second century CE, while the others are later—estimates for Heliodorus's work are as late as the fourth century CE (Morgan 2003, 417).

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identity of its protagonist, and in particular, with emphasizing the simultaneously divine and mortal attributes of Jesus. John accomplishes this articulation of Jesus's divine nature through the use of physical signs that point to Jesus's mortal body as, at the same time, divine. Likewise, the physical nature of the apparent-death experiences of the heroines of the romance novels collides with the visual descriptions of the heroines as goddesses—their bodies shine forth with divine light. In the context of the *Scheintoten* experienced by the heroines, John's narration of Jesus's survival of his death on the cross is readable as an event that at the same time concretizes his association with his patron deity. In this paper, I will first trace the trope of *Scheintod* in the Greek romances in order to illustrate how the episodes are constructed to the effect that the protagonists exist in a dual state of being alive and being dead. Next, I demonstrate how the novels suggest the divinity of the heroines, especially through the trope of coming back to life. In light of these analyses, I turn to John's preoccupation with Jesus's divinity and examine how his coming back to life after crucifixion participates in *Scheintod* as a means of expressing John's unique Christology.

II. *SCHEINTOD* IN THE NOVELS

In the Greek romance novels of the first few centuries CE, *Scheintod* is widely used as an element of suspense in order to confuse the identities of the female protagonists and, in so doing, develop the plot.² Apparent deaths occur in *Chaereas and Callirhoe* (1.4.12ff.), *An Ethiopian Story* (2.3.3), *Leucippe and Clitophon* (3.15.5; 5.7.4; 7.3.8), and *An Ephesian Tale* (3.6.5). In *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, Callirhoe is “killed” by her husband, who reacts in anger to the malicious rumour of her infidelity. She is buried in a stately tomb, in her bridal clothes, surrounded by “a royal profusion of funeral offerings: first, the gold and silver from the dowry; beautiful clothing and jewellery—Hermocrates added to it a lot of the booty he had taken; and gifts from relatives and friends. Last of all

² Erwin Rohde (1914, 287) was the first to point out how popular this theme is in the ancient romances (cf. Wehrli 1965, 142–48).

followed Chaereas's wealth" ([1.6.4](#)).³ Upon waking, Callirhoe laments her fate, but it is not long before tomb robbers come upon her and decide to steal her away to sell her as a slave in a foreign city. Later on, in book three, Chaereas, the would-be uxoricide, arrives at the tomb intent on ending his own life and joining Callirhoe in death, only to find the tomb empty. Hoping to retrieve her corpse (he still believes that she is dead), he sets out after the pirates, commencing the travel narrative so typical of the romances. While the readership knows that Callirhoe is not "really" dead, Chaereas does not—this dual state that Callirhoe is in creates a narrative reality in which Callirhoe both is and is not dead at the same time.

Charikleia is first thought dead in *An Ethiopian Story* in 2.3.3, when her lover assumes she could not have survived a bloody battle, only to be told that she had been secreted away in a cave for safekeeping (1.28–29). When told of her safety, Theagenes is overjoyed and goes to retrieve her, only to find a corpse lying in the mouth of the cave, burnt. Again, Theagenes assumes the woman is Charikleia, dead, and begins to mourn without turning over the body to check the face (2.3–4). Even though a page later, a distinctly not-dead Charikleia calls out from the back of the cave, Theagenes's mourning demonstrates that for his character, Charikleia's *Scheintod* is not apparent, but real. Her reemergence as a living, breathing woman is no less miraculous than had she been indeed killed.

Anthia's attempted suicide in [An Ephesian Tale 3.6.5](#) results in her own apparent death scene. Thinking Habrocomes, her husband, dead, Anthia convinces a travelling doctor to give her a poison. The doctor instead gives Anthia a sleeping potion, which she takes, expecting to die. She instead falls into a deep sleep, only to be found by Perilaus, her would-be suitor. Perilaus mourns for his bride in a great show of grief and lays Anthia out in a tomb, dressed in fine clothes, surrounded by treasures and wealth. No sooner is Anthia

³ Unless otherwise indicated, English translations of the romances are from Reardon 2008. For all primary sources, the embedded hyperlinks offer easy reference to free (though often older) scholarly editions.

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placed in the tomb than she wakes up and realises that she is not, in fact, dead. Intent on joining Habrocomes in death, she resolves to starve herself to death by remaining in the tomb, only to be “rescued” by some pirate grave-robbers. Habrocomes, alive, vows to join his wife in death when he hears of her death, and thus continues the complicated false-death/life cycle which dominates the novel. The intricacy of the characters’ status as living or dead, as in the other novels, allows for an overlapping of narrative reality in which characters are simultaneously living and dead, depending on which character’s perspective dominates the tale.

The most explicit example of this duality is found in *Leucippe and Clitophon*. In [3.15](#) Clitophon has the misfortune to witness the sacrifice of his beloved, Leucippe. Our heroine is captured by brigands and brought to an altar in a stereotypically “foreign” rite, described by Achilles Tatius as Egyptian. The brigands pour a libation over Leucippe’s head while poor Clitophon watches, helpless. Leucippe is rendered immobile while one of the attendants

raised a sword and plunged it into her heart and then sawed all the way down to her abdomen. Her viscera leaped out. The attendants pulled out her entrails and carried them in their hands over to the altar. When it was well done they carved the whole lot up, and all the bandits shared the meal. ([3.15.4-5](#))

Clitophon, the narrator of the tale, prepares to kill himself with his sword—from his perspective, Leucippe has been viciously disembowelled in a horrific sacrifice as he watched from afar. Just as he is about to join her in her death, he is stopped by friends who know the truth about Leucippe’s mock sacrifice. In the moments between Leucippe’s death and Clitophon’s attempted suicide, two narrative realities exist—Leucippe both lives and is dead in her coffin. Then the pair, Menelaos and Satyros, tells Clitophon how they orchestrated a charade using theatre techniques so that Leucippe would only *appear* to be sacrificed. Later, Leucippe is “decapitated” before Clitophon’s very eyes and again suffers a bout of *Scheintod* (5.7.4). Again, Clitophon laments her death as real

before he comes to know that Leucippe has miraculously escaped harm, as her letter, read a few chapters later, dramatically reveals.

***Scheintod* in the Context of Assumed Divinity**

The trope of the apparent death, or *Scheintod*, is therefore clearly a stock prop in the ancient novels used to create tension and suspense. However, in the romances, *Scheintod* also has another function, which I propose is to point to the possible divinity of those seemingly brought back to life. Tracing the history of resurrection in Greek and Latin literature, Bowersock (1994, 103) notes that for the ancients, the concept of a resurrected human was foreign; necromancy was a popular feature of ancient magic, but resurrection was not a common concept in non-Jewish literature until after the Jesus people started talking about it. Bowersock indirectly suggests that the heroines' false deaths and lively reappearances are suggestive of their association with the divine: "Gods might die and be reborn, but not mortals of flesh and blood" (102). The context of this statement is that in the ancient world, very few people returned from the dead and all of them were heroes, a category of being that straddles the fence between mortal and immortal. Antonius Diogenes's *The Wonders Beyond Thule* includes the character of Zamolxis who had been resurrected from death and was thence regarded as a divinity (Bowersock 1994, 100; Photius, *Bibl.* 110a [166], 143–144, lines 22–37 [Henry and Schamp 1959–1991]; cf. [Herodotus, *Hist.* 4.94–96](#)); heroes, for example Protesilaus (Philostratus, *Her.* 11.7 [=§675 in Kayser 1870–1871]), returning from Hades participates in this understanding. In other words, whether it is only those with a divine spark who are able to return from death or whether returning from death grants an individual divinity, there is a clear association in the ancient Mediterranean between those who come back to life and the divine realm. For the romantic heroines, who are already channelling multiple characteristics of the epic heroes,⁴ a return from death in the form of

⁴ See Warren (2015, 77–114) for a discussion of the various ways in which the heroines in particular are described in terms borrowed directly from the

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Scheintod contributes not only to their depiction in the tradition of heroes, but also works with other tropes of divinity to establish their identities as goddesses.

In the novels, the association between divinity and coming back from the grave is solidified by the constant identifications of heroines with various divinities. In *An Ephesian Tale*, we are introduced to Anthia with a comparison to Artemis.⁵ The novel opens with a festival procession in which Anthia is taking part:

Anthia's beauty was an object of wonder . . . she wore a purple tunic down to the knee, fastened with a girdle and falling loose over her arms, with a fawnskin over it, a quiver attached, and arrows for weapons; she carried javelins and was followed by dogs. Often as they saw here in the sacred enclosure the Ephesians would worship her as Artemis. And so on this occasion too the crowd gave a cheer when they saw her, and there was a whole clamor of exclamations from the spectators: some were amazed and said it was the goddess in person; some that it was someone else made by the goddess in her own image. But they all prayed and prostrated themselves and congratulated her parents. ([1.2.2ff.](#))

The crowd views Anthia, dressed as Artemis with her dogs and her fawn skin, as the goddess, either a direct epiphany or a manifestation of the goddess on earth; in either case, it makes no difference as they bow down to worship her.⁶

Likewise, in *Leucippe and Clitophon*, our protagonist is described in terms that hint at her divinity. When Clitophon first

epics.

⁵ A further clear example where Anthia is worshipped as a goddess can be found in [An Ephesian Tale 1.12.1-2](#).

⁶ W. R. Connor (1987, 44) distinguishes between Anthia as goddess and Anthia's role in depicting the goddess, but more recent scholarship articulates the problem with distinguishing in a phenomenological sense a mortal woman dressed as a goddess from the goddess herself. In other words, from the point of view of those watching the procession, Anthia's humanity makes no difference—she is the goddess (Platt 2011, 17; cf. [Plutarch, Arat. 32.1-2](#)).

catches sight of Leucippe in 1.4, he is astonished by her sudden appearance (*ἐκφάνεται*) and blinded by her dazzling, lightning-like beauty. He notes her tall form, too. These descriptive terms, while they might seem ordinary to the casual reader, are in actuality consistently used throughout ancient literature to describe the epiphanic appearances of deities. Leucippe, then, appears to Clitophon as a goddess.⁷

An Ethiopian Story also participates in the characterization of its heroine, Charikleia, as a goddess. Several times throughout the narrative, she is depicted in the posture or costume of a divinity, and, like Leucippe, is described using imagery of light and brightness. When we first meet her, in 1.2.1–2, Charikleia is outfitted like Artemis with bow and quiver, but sits cradling her wounded lover like Isis; those who view the scene cannot decide whether she is a goddess or the manifestation of the goddess as her priestess (1.2.6). Most significant for the present analysis is Charikleia's depiction as radiantly divine at the very moment of what would have been her human sacrifice in 10.9 (emphasis added):

Then, before the people supervising the test [of her virginity by standing on the gridiron] could tell her what to do, she produced, from a little pouch that she was carrying, her Delphic robe, woven with gold thread and embroidered with rays, and put it on. She let her hair fall free, ran forward like one possessed, and sprang onto the gridiron, where she stood for some time without taking any hurt, her beauty blazing with a new and dazzling radiance (*τῷ τε κάλλει τότε πλέον ἐκλάμποντι καταστράπτουσα*) as she stood conspicuous on her lofty pedestal; in her magnificent robe she seemed more like an image of a goddess (*ἀγάλματι θεοῦ πλέον ἢ θνητῆς γυναικί*) than a mortal woman. A thrill of wonder ran through the crowd.⁸

⁷ For more discussion of the specific tropes throughout the novels that imply divinity, see Warren 2015, 93–105.

⁸ Greek text from Rattenbury, Lumb, and Maillon 1935.

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Again, the vocabulary used in this passage, and elsewhere, associates Charikleia with goddesses described elsewhere with similar terminology. I would also point out that in this passage, it is precisely at the moment when Charikleia should have died that her divinity becomes apparent.

The association between *Scheintod* and divinity is also visible in Callirhoe's depiction as a goddess. In *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, our heroine is constantly assumed to be divine, more so than in any of the other novels. I count at least nine distinct instances where Callirhoe is described as a shining beauty, is worshipped as a goddess, or is otherwise assumed to be an epiphanic manifestation of a goddess.⁹ For instance, after she is sold as a slave, her new master sees her for the first time and begins to bow down to her in worship, believing her to be Aphrodite (2.3.6). Like Charikleia, however, Callirhoe is early on associated with divinity because of her miraculous escape from death. After being entombed with many precious items, Callirhoe is kidnapped by pirates. When her supposed widower Chaereas comes to make an offering, he finds the tomb open and his beloved gone. Immediately he assumes that he "had a goddess for a wife without knowing it" and that Callirhoe has returned to the divine realm (3.3.5). Chaereas comes to this conclusion in light of the relationship between the mortal and divine realms and the assumed means of identifying divine beings on earth: those who escape death are likely to be gods themselves, or at least to embody divinity in part, as heroes do.¹⁰

In other words, intersecting with the seemingly constant attacks on the lives of the romantic heroines is the continued concern with the true, divine identity of these women. The reader knows that their identity as members of elite society is at stake, but certain tropes in the novels function to depict the heroines as divine, too.

⁹ [Chaereas and Callirhoe 1.1](#); [1.1.15-16](#); [1.14.1](#); [2.1.5](#); [2.2.2](#); [2.3.6](#); [3.2.14](#); [3.9.1](#); [5.3.9](#). This is not an exhaustive catalogue of epiphanic allusions.

¹⁰ The only humans to return alive from Hades are the heroes Heracles, Theseus, and Orpheus; ordinary mortals, such as Alcestis and Euridice, do not return to life.

The romance novels' depiction of the heroines as goddesses reflects the Hellenistic understanding of the very porous boundaries between hero and god. The romantic representation of this relationship between the divine and mortal realms emerges from the similar relationship found in the Homeric epics; there, heroes and gods become associated with one another through the death of the hero in a way that blurs the categories between human and divine (Nagy 1981). The religious aspects contained in the novels not only represent what are probably the ordinary worldview of the society in which the novels were composed—the very same world in which John was written—but in a related fashion also reflect the projection of the expectations around the relationship between human beings and the divine in the ancient world. As Versnel (1987, 46) puts it, “the result was that ancient man [*sic*] could never be sure whether the person he was talking with was not actually a god in disguise.” That is, the close similarities between the descriptions of the heroes and the gods in the romances are intentionally crafted to blur the line between human and god in ways understandable to their audience.

In Greek hero cults the death of the hero is required to establish the cult to the hero; it is also the moment of death that in literature establishes the identification of the hero with the god or goddess (Nagy 1981, 286). According to Gregory Nagy (1981, 142; see also 33, 113), even though Achilles's death is postponed until after the *Iliad*, the text uses Patroclus as his surrogate and thus the death of the hero still takes place. Thus, the deferral of the hero's death does not mean that the death does not occur in the narrative; as Nagy shows, a hero can in some ways be both alive and dead at the same time in the literary world. This deferral of death is also what happens in the romances for Leucippe, Anthia, and Charikleia; the paradoxical nature of their deaths, lives, and their dual identities is firmly bound up in their *Scheintoten*. As with the identification of the hero and the deity in the epics, in the novels the death and divinity collide to create the divine-hero association.

III. JESUS'S CRUCIFIXION AS *SCHEINTOD*

While the most obvious commonality between Jesus's crucifixion and the trope of *Scheintod* is that Jesus comes back to life after his death, I propose that several other features in John's Gospel provide the framework within which to view Jesus's survival of his crucifixion as an apparent death. Viewing the event of Jesus's crucifixion as *Scheintod* illuminates features of John's Christology and in doing so cements the association between apparent death and divinity. The tension throughout the Gospel of John between the divinity and humanity of Jesus is of paramount importance for the interpretation of John's version of the crucifixion. As such, I argue that the groundwork for a christological interpretation of [John 19:28–37](#) is put in place throughout the Gospel, especially in the prologue, through the emphasis on the relationship between Jesus's divine and human characteristics. John's primary concern throughout the Gospel is in demonstrating this relationship between Jesus and the divine (Brown 1965, 556 n. 52), and the author's insistence that Jesus is *both* fleshly ([1:14](#)) and divine ([1:1](#)) indicates the author's concern with Jesus's identity as *both simultaneously*. Indeed, throughout the Gospel, John takes care to emphasize that people experience both Jesus's corporeal and divine attributes in their encounters with him. In [John 3:13–16](#), the author reiterates that Jesus is unique in his simultaneous earthly and heavenly natures: he is the one who has come down from heaven and whose body will be lifted up on the cross. In this early example, John's Jesus highlights that his identification with God depends on the lifting up on the cross of his physical body, implying that his glorification is implicated in his physical being; this concept is solidified in [John 8:28](#) when Jesus again claims that "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he."

John's emphasis of Jesus's physical body through both Jesus's statements and, in particular, his signs, *causes belief* in the glory of God-as-Jesus. Embedded in a healing narrative and nestled among verses which speak of Jesus as the light in the world, [John 9:5–7a](#) highlights Jesus's physical body by featuring his saliva: "As long as I

am in the world I am the light of the world.’ Having said this, he spat on the ground, made a paste with the spittle, put this over the eyes of the blind man, and said to him, ‘Go and wash in the Pool of Siloam.’” Likewise, [10:33](#) concretizes the relationship between Jesus’s divinity and his physical acts of healing when Jesus is accused of claiming to be divine—the accusation is directly linked to Jesus’s healing works in [verse 32](#):

οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι fetched stones to stone him, so Jesus said to them, ‘I have shown you many good works from my Father; for which of these are you stoning me?’ οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι answered him, “We are stoning you, not for doing a good work, but for blasphemy; though you are only a man, you claim to be God.” ([10:31–33](#))

Here, οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι¹¹ react to Jesus’s physical works in the physical world and conclude that through them, Jesus is indicating his identification as God. Thus, as in the romances, divinity is apparent through the physicality of the protagonist.

The very corporeal actions that Jesus does, his signs, whether healing the wounded with mud made from his own spit, or the presence of his own body lifted up, concretize the dialectical relationship between the Word and the flesh. The incarnation of the Word in the flesh of humanity means that the divine aspects of God and the corporeal ones of Jesus are in fact inseparable; through Jesus’s physical acts his divinity is recognized. As many scholars have already pointed out (e.g., Anderson 1996, 24; Bultmann 1971, 62ff.; 1951–1955, 2:3–14; Käsemann 1969, 154–55; O’Grady 1984, 63–66; Neyrey 1986, 152–71), this dialectical relationship between the Word and the flesh is most obvious in the prologue, where the

¹¹ I have opted to leave this term in Greek to avoid the complicated issue of how to translate it since it can either be Judeans or Jews in almost all instances in the New Testament (see Cohen 1999). Recently the translation of this term has been much discussed in the *Marginalia Review of Books*, [Jew and Judean: A Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts](#).

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purpose and message of the Gospel is set forth—namely, to identify Jesus with God—but it is also exhibited throughout the Gospel. That the Word and God are equivalent and that the Word then became a real human being with flesh and blood are implicated so early in John's text that they indicate the paramount importance of a fleshly *and* divine Jesus for John's Christology. Jesus's crucifixion, an intensely physical means of death, participates in how John articulates Jesus's divinity precisely because Jesus survives it.¹²

Approaching Jesus's crucifixion from the perspective of the narrative allows us to compare it with the *Scheintoten* of the romances in a way that clarifies certain common elements. At the narrative level, as I have argued above, the novels make use of a series of tropes that point to the divinity of the heroines at the literary level, for no cult has been found for any of the romantic heroines. Thus, the narrative of the romances is preoccupied with the ontology of the women who drive their plots. This preoccupation provides a forum in which to read other aspects of the romances, and so to analyse these elements as either contributing to the question of the heroines' divinity or contradicting it. Given the nature of the finality of death in the Hellenistic world (i.e., death is permanent and inescapable), it also makes sense to examine their apparent deaths in light of the question of their divinity: it seems to me that in this context, *Scheintod* confirms the heroines' divinity.

In applying this approach to John, whose narrative is preoccupied with Jesus's divine identity, the crucifixion scene is now readable as a narrative that also makes claims about Jesus's divinity. Jesus, like the heroines of the novels, only appears to die—his death is not permanent. Also like the heroines of the romances, I suggest, his *Scheintod* confirms his divinity—a divinity that the Gospel of John has been promoting throughout its narrative. This feature of the Gospel is highlighted when viewed in light of the role of *Scheintod* in the novels, where it likewise functions to confirm the

¹² John's Jesus persists in being fleshly and divine after his death; he offers his very real wounds for Thomas to prod with his fingers in [20:27](#), for example.

divinity of the protagonists: coming back from death is a talent reserved for the divine or semi-divine. Three scenes in John's telling of Jesus's death support my interpretation of his death as *Scheintod*. First, [the moment of Jesus's death](#) is described in such a way that promotes the idea that it both took place and was avoided. Second, [John 19:34](#) refers to Jesus's bodily fluids in a way that ancient readers connected with divine *ichor*. And third, [the discovery of the empty tomb](#) likewise participates in a similar trope used in the Hellenistic romances to bring about the question of divine identity.

In order to understand Jesus's moment of death as a marker of *Scheintod*, it is important to examine in brief another attempt at understanding *Scheintod* in the Christian context. Judith Perkins's (2006, 401) work on fictitious *Scheintod* and power in the imperial world understands the violence and death in both early Christian martyrdom texts and in the novels to be responses to the violence inherent in the agency and lack thereof experienced by bodies in the ancient world. And while the martyrs in Perkins's analysis are depicted with gruesome detail at the moment of their physical demise, John, while he takes care to delineate the physical clues to Jesus's divinity, is less than graphic in describing the moment of his death. I propose that the avoidance of the details in John does not reflect squeamishness, but rather represents an intentionally created space in which Jesus's death both does and does not occur—a space likewise articulated in the romance novels.

The silence in John at the moment of crucifixion is deafening.¹³ John's Gospel offers few details about the experience of his death—in contrast, say, to the theatrical approach found in *Leucippe and Clitophon*—and instead leaves the moment of death unarticulated, stating simply that “with that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” ([19:30](#)). In avoiding the precise moment of death, John's Gospel participates in creating an unreal space in which Jesus's death both occurs and does not narratively take place. Unlike the later Christian martyrdom texts, which, as Perkins observes, focus

¹³ The moment of death is likewise not graphically described in the Synoptic accounts, although suffering is mentioned.

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on the bodily experience of those killed, here we find no description of what Jesus's death feels like, nor what it looks like. In fact, the whole of the time from when Jesus is crucified to his death is covered in only thirteen verses, as opposed to the chapter and a half devoted to his trial and sentencing. Jesus's crucifixion, when mentioned, is often a dependent clause supporting a main clause about something else—the division of his clothes, in one case ([19:23](#)), or describing the location of his cross, in another ([19:20](#)). Jesus dies in a single verse: “When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ‘It is finished.’ With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit” ([19:30](#)). The absence of description of Jesus's agony provides distance from the observers. Just as Clitophon watches at a distance when Leucippe is sacrificed, and thus does not fully comprehend what he sees, so too the readers of John's crucifixion scene are not treated to all the gory details. Perkins (2006, 401) likewise observes the unreality of death in the ancient novels: “What the motif in these narratives connotes,” she writes, “is not resurrection, but the illusory nature of the death, its misinterpretation *as* death.” At arm's length, Jesus's death takes on a component of unreality, just as with the theatrical sacrifice of Leucippe.

After Jesus's death in John, two further incidents signal his survival of the execution, making his death only apparent and implying his divinity. The verses immediately after Jesus's death describe Jesus in a way that aligns with Greco-Roman expectations around immortal wounds. In [John 19:34](#) we read that a soldier pierces Jesus's side. “One of the soldiers pierced Jesus's side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.” Verses 36 and 37 suggest that this was done in order to fulfill certain scriptures ([Exod 12:46](#); [Num 9:12](#); [Ps 34:20](#); [Zech 12:10](#)), but at least one ancient reader viewed the action in a different light. We know from Origen that Celsus read [John 19:34](#) in light of [II. 5.335–340](#):

Celsus next says: “What is the nature of the *ichor* in the body of the crucified Jesus? Is it such as flows in the bodies of the immortal gods?” He [Celsus] puts this question in a spirit of mockery; but we shall show from the serious narratives of the

Gospels, although Celsus may not like it, that it was no mythic and Homeric ichor which flowed from the body of Jesus, but that, after His death, “one of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side, and there came thereout blood and water.” ([Origen, Cels. 2.36](#); Chadwick 1953)

Celsus’s interpretation of [John 19:34](#) suggests that this image functioned on multiple levels for ancient readers. Celsus makes the connection between the Homeric use of *ichor* and the blood and water from Jesus’s side in order to mock Christians’ belief in Jesus’s divinity, and Origen in his rebuttal takes pains to distance John’s verse from what he considers the myths of Homer, as opposed to the “true” signs of divinity elsewhere in the Gospels. While Celsus views Jesus’s divinity as an impossibility, and therefore scathingly interprets the blood and water from Jesus’s side as *ichor*, Origen defends Jesus’s divinity in spite of Homer. Three characteristics of John’s Gospel support my interpretation that the blood and water in [John 19:34](#) may work within John’s Christology to promote the idea of Jesus’s divinity: John’s overall concern with Jesus’s divinity; John’s noted affinities with other Hellenistic literary types; and the function of *Scheintod* in the romance novels, which I propose that John also shares. This connection between the blood and water in Jesus’s wounded body and the divine fluid also makes sense in the context of John’s use of physical signs to point to this ontology: after all, the body lifted up on the cross is the mechanism by which Jesus is identified as God.

After Jesus is taken down from the cross and entombed, Mary Magdalene approaches his burial site and sees that “the stone had been removed from the entrance” ([20:1](#)). Andy Reimer (2005, 297–316) notes the affinities that the empty tomb motif in the Gospels shares with the Hellenistic romances. Chariton writes of Chaereas, “When he reached the tomb, he found that the stones had been moved and the entrance was open. He was astonished at the sight and overcome with fearful perplexity at what had happened” ([3.3.1–2](#)). It is obvious even from a cursory reading that certain tropes are found in the descriptions of the discovery of the empty tomb both in

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John and in *Chaereas and Callirhoe*: both Mary Magdalene and Chaereas approach the tomb around dawn (*Callirhoe*: περίορθρος; John: πρωῖ σκοτίας ἔτι οὔσης) only to find that the stone (λίθος) has been removed (*Callirhoe*: κεκίνημένους; John: ἡρμένον) and the tomb is empty. In both cases, the curious absence of a body must be confirmed by a third party—Peter and “the other disciple” in the case of John and an anonymous man in *Chaereas and Callirhoe*. In highlighting the similar structure of the tropes across these texts, Reimer’s work allows me to draw out further conclusions regarding the use of the trope of the empty tomb in both John and the novels. While Reimer (2005, 300) postulates that the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb influenced those found in the romances, in particular *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, I make no comment on the origins of this motif.¹⁴ For the purpose of this analysis, what matters is not literary influence but shared use for common ends; that is, it seems to me that the function of the empty tomb is that it solidifies the significance of survival of death, which I argue is divinity. In providing the reader with an empty tomb, the narrative points out the unreality of the death experienced by the protagonist.¹⁵ In the case of *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, as I noted above, the empty tomb prompts Chaereas to declare that she must be a goddess; likewise, in John Jesus’s disappearance from his final resting place points to his divinity.

¹⁴ For reference, Reardon (1991, 17; 2003, 312–25) dates *Chaereas and Callirhoe* to around the middle of the first century CE. The manuscript \mathfrak{P}^{52} is dated to the middle of the second century, making it possible that John first circulated around the end of the first century, but Reimer (2005, 300) postulates a pre-canonical-Gospel version of Jesus’s empty tomb circulating orally around the time of Nero.

¹⁵ Of course, graves and tombs, including empty tombs, are also closely associated with hero cult in Greco-Roman religion. See Betz 2004, 25–47; 1990, 245–47; Yarbro Collins 1995, 88–100; and Lüdemann 1994, 32–33, 43, 67–69, 141–53, 156–57, 216–22.

IV. CONCLUSION

John's Gospel depicts Jesus as simultaneously fleshly and divine. Nowhere is this clearer than in the moment of his crucifixion ([John 19:30](#)). I argue that Jesus's crucifixion—and notably, his survival—establishes firmly his divinity. As the other signs in John's Gospel depict Jesus's divinity through his physicality, so too does his crucifixion ultimately identify him with God, contributing to John's portrayal of a dialectical relationship between Word and Flesh. One way that this is most visible is in examining Jesus's death in light of other heroic *Scheintoten* in contemporaneous literature, namely the Hellenistic novels. The romances share with John a concern for correct identity, and indeed, devote many pages to describing the divine identities of the heroines. The heroines look like goddesses, are worshipped as goddesses by strangers, and even are assumed to be goddesses by their partners. In particular, I have argued that the apparent deaths of these heroines are part of that divine identification. This association between survival of death and divinity is most clear in *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, where Chaereas, finding the empty tomb, concludes that his wife must have been a goddess all along. *Scheintod* is part of the literary toolbox of ancient writers depicting their characters as gods. Comparing Jesus's sacrificial death on the cross to the *Scheintoten* of the Greek romances illuminates a possible reading of [John 19](#). I propose that Jesus's death and his escape from it work within the Gospel to confirm his divinity. While some of the novels create a sense of unreality of death either by using over-the-top descriptions of brutal apparent murders, or simply by creating distance between the heroine and other protagonists, John facilitates the unreality of Jesus's crucifixion with silence. Jesus's body hoisted on the cross points, like his other physical signs, to his identity as the Son of God. His survival confirms this identification. Further, both the flow of blood and water from Jesus's side in [19:34](#) and the empty tomb episode later on participate in culturally accepted means of suggesting divinity. Indeed, Jesus's divinity is made even more real by the fact that, for the author of John's Gospel, Jesus has truly died

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and truly been raised up, as opposed to the romantic heroines, whose deaths are merely apparent. By examining John as a text produced in the literary milieu of the ancient Mediterranean, John's unique Christology is more clearly viewed.

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