

Moving the margins with/of methodology: Towards a drama lens on the Fourth Gospel¹

Cornelia van Deventer
South African Theological Seminary
cornelia@sats.edu.za

Abstract

Various scholars have speculated about the possible link between the Fourth Gospel and drama. Such a connection, if valid, could potentially lead to the widening of hermeneutical lenses with which the Gospel is explored. While the exegetical field of biblical performance criticism has begun to break open the hermeneutical field by introducing performative and oral elements into the conversation, an attempt to formulate a methodology for a drama analysis of the text still needs to be made. This article evaluates the possibility of reading the Fourth Gospel through a drama lens in order to explore its possible performative impact on a first-time hypothetical audience. The article experiments with possible parameters of biblical drama criticism and how the translation of the text into stage-script format could be useful in academic and ecclesial spaces. Such a translation invites new experiences with the text and an expansion of the hermeneutical spectrum to include various non-textual elements like sound and sight. Moreover, it widens the hermeneutical scope to explore the audience's own (vulnerable) journey with the performance by taking their possible struggle(s) with the drama seriously.

Keywords

Fourth Gospel; drama; methodology; performance

1 Some sections of this article were taken from my PhD dissertation; C. van Deventer, "Embracing Vulnerability: A Drama Analysis of the Johannine Prologue and Crucifixion Scenes." PhD diss., Stellenbosch University, 2018. [Online]. Available: <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/handle/10019.1/104912>

1. John and drama?

The art of connecting the Fourth Gospel to a drama is not a new one.² Pioneered by F.R.M. Hitchcock's exploratory article "Is the Fourth Gospel a Drama?" (1923),³ this perspective has grown over the past century and is shared by others like C.R. Bowen (1930),⁴ Milo Connick (1948),⁵ Stephen Smalley (1978),⁶ William Domeris (1983; 2018),⁷ S.A. Cummins (2008),⁸ Kasper Bro Larsen (2008),⁹ George Parsenios (2010),¹⁰ Harold Attridge (2015),¹¹ and Cathleen Conway (2015).¹² Probably the biggest contribution to this approach comes from Jo-Ann Brant, in her book *Dialogue and Drama. Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (2004).¹³ Brant confidently uses the word drama for the gospel since it portrays "a story fraught with tension between characters with a conflict that arises at its

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- 2 I discussed the reasoning for connecting John with the drama elsewhere. See Van Deventer, *Embracing Vulnerability*, 17–27.
 - 3 F.R.M. Hitchcock, "Is the Fourth Gospel a Drama? (1923)" in M.W.G. Stibbe (ed.), *The Gospel of John as Literature. An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (New York: Brill, 1993), 15–25.
 - 4 C.R. Bowen, "The Fourth Gospel as Dramatic Material." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 49 (1930): 292–305.
 - 5 C.M. Connick, "The Dramatic Character of the Fourth Gospel." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 67, no. 2 (1948): 159–169.
 - 6 S.S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1978), 192–203.
 - 7 W. Domeris, "The Johannine Drama." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 42 (1983): 29–35; Domeris, "The Johannine Drama (Revised)." *Conspectus Special Edition* (2018): 1–11.
 - 8 S.A. Cummins, "John," in K.J. Vanhoozer (ed.). *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-by-book Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008). 60–73.
 - 9 Kasper B. Larsen, *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes in the Gospel of John* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
 - 10 G.L. Parsenios, *Rhetoric and Drama in the Johannine Lawsuit Motif* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).
 - 11 H.W. Attridge, "The Gospel of John: Genre Matters," in K.B. Larsen (ed.), *The Gospel of John as Genre Mosaic* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 27–46.
 - 12 C.M. Conway, "John, Gender and Genre," in *The Gospel of John as Genre Mosaic*, 69–84.
 - 13 J.A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama. Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004).

beginning and builds to a crisis.”¹⁴ Scholars like Cummins,¹⁵ Swanson,¹⁶ and Rhoads¹⁷ therefore recognise that the interest to study the Fourth Gospel through a drama lens is a noteworthy development.

This is the sentiment which gave rise to the experimental exegetical exercise of translating the Fourth Gospel as a script and exploring it accordingly – an exercise that this article aims to sample. While it cannot be said that the Fourth Gospel is a drama, it seems to contain various elements that resemble a drama and can thus invite a drama lens to the exegetical process.¹⁸ However, the space for such an analysis will also need to be found within the sub-discipline of Biblical Studies. For this, it is imperative to look at biblical performance criticism as emerging methodological field.

2. Biblical performance criticism

African biblical scholar Musa Dube¹⁹ has long emphasised the importance of biblical scholarship which takes seriously the oral culture within African communities. Moreover, scholars like Tom Boomershine, Joanna Dewey, David Rhoads, and Holly Hearon have emphasised the general lack of attention to the oral/aural nature of texts and have therefore began experimenting with an exegetical avenue referred to as biblical performance criticism, which approaches biblical texts as witnesses composed to be read out loud and even performed in front of faith communities and churches.²⁰

14 Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 4.

15 Cummins, “John,” 65.

16 R.W. Swanson, “Taking Place/Taking Up Space,” in H.E. Hearon & P. Ruge-Jones, (eds.), *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media. Story and Performance* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 133.

17 D. Rhoads, “What is Performance Criticism?” in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*, 94.

18 Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part II.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36, no. 4 (2006): 172 makes a similar point by referring to various NT texts: ‘Even if Second Testament writings are not theatre as such, many of them are theatre-like.’

19 M. Dube, “Introduction,” in M. Dube (ed.), *Other Ways of Reading. African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 1–19.

20 J.A. Maxey, “Biblical Performance Criticism and Bible Translation,” in J.A. Maxey & E.R. Wendland (eds.), *Translating Scripture for Sound and Performance* (Eugene:

Perry succinctly defines performance criticism as “the analysis and practise of performance”.²¹ It explores the oral and performative nature of a text,²² and analyses the possible effect(s) on an audience in a specific context²³ by incorporating sound, sight, speech, and the reaction/response of an audience.²⁴ Horsley motivates the need for the appropriation of performance criticism by referring to the danger of the “typographical captivity of biblical studies,” which stems from the assumption that “biblical ‘books’ were widely distributed, readily available, and easily read” in the ancient Mediterranean.²⁵ Literacy was, in fact, limited in the first century (even among the elite), and oral transmission was the chosen (but not only) medium of communication.²⁶ This included the communication of biblical texts, which were “repeatedly ‘reactivated’ in oral performance.”²⁷

Cascade Books, 2012), 1.

- 21 P.S. Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 31.
- 22 D. Rhoads, “The Art of Translating for Oral Performance,” 26.
- 23 R. Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing* (Eugene: Cascade, 2013), 304.
- 24 D. Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part I.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36 no. 3 (2006): 126.
- 25 R. Horsley, “Oral Communication, Oral Performance, and New Testament Interpretation,” in A.B. McGowan & K.H. Richards (eds.), *Method & Meaning. Essays on New Testament Interpretation in Honour of Harold W. Attridge* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 125.
- 26 An estimated 10% of the population in the Roman empire, and 3% of the population in Palestine would have been considered as literate in the first century (Horsley, “Oral Communication, Oral Performance, and New Testament Interpretation,” 126, 128). Even among the literate, oral communication was an essential component (J.A. Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible. Studies on the Media Texture of the New Testament – Explorative Hermeneutics* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 76). Therefore, oral communication was necessary in the lives of the majority of the population. Horsley (Horsley, “Oral Communication, Oral Performance, and New Testament Interpretation,” 127) makes this point by referring to the fact that even legal matters were rather orally conducted and backed up by present witnesses than by written documents. P.J. Botha, (*Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012), 89) argues along the same line, stating that the house of an educated man in the first century would probably have contained an auditorium instead of a study. However, Loubser (*Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible*, 77) emphasises that the impact and role of writing in the first century should not be underestimated.
- 27 Horsley, “Oral Communication, Oral Performance, and New Testament Interpretation,” 139; cf. H.E. Hearon, “The Implications of Orality for Studies of the Biblical Text,” in R.A. Horsley, J.A. Draper, & J.M. Foley (eds.), *Performing the Gospel. Orality, Memory, and Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 3–20; Rhoads, “Narrative Criticism: Practices

Without creating a false dichotomy between literacy and orality,²⁸ or ascribing any motives of playwright to the Johannine author, this study aims to latch on to the momentum of biblical performance criticism, which allows interpreters to explore various elements or versions of performance.²⁹ Such a perspective sees the Fourth Gospel as a dynamic oral text with various performative possibilities, including that of drama. Rhoads³⁰ affirms such an innovative risk by calling for the emergence of new methodologies within performance criticism that can bring the performative nature of biblical texts to the fore, among which he mentions theatre studies as a potential partner.³¹ Moreover, Swanson explores the possibility of biblical narratives finding “ensemble dramatic representation” in the exegetical field.³²

According to Rhoads,³³ such new methodologies can take on one of three approaches. The first is to imaginatively reconstruct the performance of a specific writing and then to explore that writing with the hypothetical performance in mind. The second is to reorient existing methodologies to focus on the oral dimension of biblical writings, and the third is to actually perform these texts in our own languages and explore and analyse those performances.³⁴ This article reflects on the incorporation of the first and second of the above approaches by sampling a construction of

and Prospects,” in D. Rhoads & K. Syreeni (eds.), *Characterization in the Gospels. Reconceiving Narrative Criticism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 276.

- 28 Cf. Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible*, 16. Absolute binary thinking regarding literacy and orality in the first-century Mediterranean should be steered clear from, since written texts were “embedded in the wider oral communication” (Horsley, “Oral Communication, Oral Performance, and New Testament Interpretation,” 125), as literacy and orality were essentially interrelated (*Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible*, 88). Horsley (“Oral Communication, Oral Performance, and New Testament Interpretation,” 133) further warns against falsely imagining that the scribal and oral were completely different mediums in ancient contexts.
- 29 Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing*, xvii.
- 30 Rhoads, “What is Performance Criticism,” 88.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 94; cf. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 8.
- 32 Swanson, “Taking Place/Taking Up Space,” 133.
- 33 Rhoads, “What is Performance Criticism,” 94.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 89. See J. Dewey, “Performing the Living Word. Learnings from a Storytelling Vocation,” in H.E. Hearon & P. Ruge-Jones (eds.), *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media. Story and Performance* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009), 142–155 for a colourful testimony of the experience of performing biblical texts.

a hypothetical performance of the Fourth Gospel and its analysis, and by formulating and evaluating a new methodological tool referred to as *biblical drama criticism*.

3. Biblical drama criticism

Drama criticism seeks to “examine the line of communication, the transmission of signals between stage and audience and back again.”³⁵ In order to do this, the methodology explores elements on stage, the socio-historical world found beneath the dialogue,³⁶ as well as the audience’s different reactions to the performance. However, as twenty-first century receivers of a text, the challenge remains to become an audience who would be better equipped to understand the nuances of the drama in its context.

In a drama analysis one would therefore create something along the lines of a *hypothetical audience* – a historically-informed and textually-constructed group of receivers. Literary cues in the text give insight regarding the shared knowledge between the sender and receivers (e.g., Jn 4:9), where socio-historic analysis provides more insight into the world(s) of such an audience (e.g., the ancient reality of gendered spaces amid a context of honour and shame). For the analysis of the Fourth Gospel this audience is created by pairing information from the text with socio-scientific studies of the first-century Mediterranean.³⁷

In developing a tool for the text, Aristotle’s Περὶ ποιητικῆς (commonly referred to as *The Poetics*)³⁸ becomes a crucial dialogue partner. In his discussion, Aristotle (1450a) identifies six essential elements of tragedy, which can be condensed into five for a drama analysis.³⁹ Aristotle (1450a)

35 J.L. Styan, *Drama, Stage, and Audience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1975), 1.

36 C.A. White, *Technical Theatre. A Practical Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2001), 13–24.

37 Rhoads, “Narrative Criticism of the New Testament,” 115 leans towards such an exploration in his narrative analysis of Mark 3:1–6, where he imaginatively places himself among a peasant audience listening to the story. At times, Rhoads supposes that the hypothetical audience even grumbles in an audible way at some of the nuances within the story, while they later cheer and laugh.

38 Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by S. Halliwell, W.H. Fyfe & D.C. Innes. Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

39 Although Aristotle discusses these elements under the theme of tragedy, E.J. Fink, *Dramatic Story Structure. A Primer for Screenwriters* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 2

identifies the first component to the drama as ὁ μῦθος (the plot) and defines it as the sequence of events that carries along the drama. The second element (1450b) is that of ἥθος (custom, habit, or behavioural patter),⁴⁰ which refers to characterisation. Characters are known through various means, including their speech, actions, gestures, clothing, the speech of others, and the settings in which they appear and function.⁴¹

Thirdly, Aristotle (1450b) refers to δίανοια (thought), defining it as “the ability to say what is possible and appropriate.” In drama theory, this is translated as theme(s) – the morals or lessons that the audience can learn through the story.⁴² The fourth element is that of λέξις (a saying; a speech) (1450b) and μέλος (tune; melody), which can be categorised under *the audible*. Language can serve to inform or confuse the audience.⁴³ The hidden or intended meaning behind words (or actions) in a drama functions as subtext, which can be found in various forms, including symbolism, irony, contrast, and comparison. The author can also use memorable lines to keep the audience engaged and create certain expectations among them.⁴⁴ Included in the audible, are the sounds coming from the audience-itself. The last element is what Aristotle (1450b) refers to as ὄψις (the visual). The goal of the visual is to capture and hold the attention of the audience and to reinforce other elements of the drama.⁴⁵ This includes settings, décor, and props, as well as the visual experience of the audience-itself.

The focal point of such an analysis is the hypothetical audience and their reception of and grappling with the drama. This is brought to the fore by focussing on the aforementioned elements and bringing the world on stage into dialogue with the audience’s socio-historic realities. While the above

argues that the elements apply to all forms of drama (even comedy) and are commonly used in script writing and drama analysis.

40 J.P. Louw & E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*. Logos Edition (New York: United Bible Societies), 1996.

41 M. Keuris, *The Play. A Manual* (Pretoria: Van Schaik, 1996), 20–21, 24–27; J. L. Resseguie, “A Narrative-Critical Approach to the Fourth Gospel,” in C.W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 11.

42 Fink, *Dramatic Story Structure*, 73.

43 Ibid., 102.

44 Ibid., 99–100.

45 Ibid., 117.

elements do not constitute a comprehensive tool for drama analysis, they are plausible starting points for a creative methodology which explores the dramatic and performative side of the Fourth Gospel. The study at hand follows the experiment of translating a pericope from the Fourth Gospel into the form of a stage-style script and analysing it accordingly to unlock something of the performative dimension(s) and rhetorical effect of the text. To illustrate what such an analysis would look like, an excerpt from the drama analysis of John 19:17–18 and 19:28–30 will follow (the beginning and ending of the crucifixion scene). The text will be provided in Greek, followed by a narrative translation (my own), and a translation in the form of a stage-style script – the performative translation.⁴⁶ Finally, some exegetical observations will be made from the perspective of a hypothetical audience.

4. John 19:17–18⁴⁷

4.1 Greek

... καὶ βαστάζων ἑαυτῷ τὸν σταυρὸν ἐξῆλθεν εἰς τὸν λεγόμενον Κρανίου Τόπον, ὃ λέγεται Ἑβραϊστὶ Γολγοθα, ὅπου αὐτὸν ἐσταύρωσαν, καὶ μετ' αὐτοῦ ἄλλους δύο ἐντεῦθεν καὶ ἐντεῦθεν, μέσον δὲ τὸν Ἰησοῦν.

4.2 Narrative translation

And, carrying his own cross, he was going out to [the place] called the place of a skull, which was called Golgotha in Aramaic; there they crucified him, and with him two others on each side, and Jesus in the middle.

46 The script format will be edited according to Fink, *Dramatic Story Structure*, 191–194 layout.

47 Verse 17 indicates a change in setting from Pilate's praetorium, where Jesus was just trialled, to Golgotha. While the division between verse 16b (Παρέλαβον οὖν τὸν Ἰησοῦν – “So, they took Jesus...”) and 17 (... καὶ βαστάζων ἑαυτῷ τὸν σταυρὸν ἐξῆλθεν – “... and, carrying his own cross, he went out ...”) splits a sentence in half, the change in setting merits a scene change. Verse 17, therefore, opens the crucifixion scene.

4.3 Performative translation

SETTING

The scene begins with bright and warm lights. It is just after noonday.⁴⁸ The centre of the stage is elevated by rostrums representing the last climb and peak of a hill (the rest of the hill is assumed to be off stage). On the top are three wooden poles planted into the ground.⁴⁹

AT RISE

On the top of the hill are two men who are held by four SOLDIERS. They are not well-composed individuals, but rough criminals, cursing, spitting and scratching at the SOLDIERS who are holding them down. Some of the SOLDIERS on the hill are holding hammers and long nails.

[17] JESUS staggers onto the scene (on the far left), carrying a heavy wooden beam, surrounded by a group of SOLDIERS and a large CROWD. JESUS is still bloody from the scourging and the audience can see that he is severely fatigued as he collapses every now and then. He has been climbing this hill for a while and the heat of the sun seems to be intensifying his discomfort.

(JESUS is stumbling and moaning, struggling to climb the hill.)

SOLDIERS

(Shoving him, some mock him and spit at him.)

Come on! Hurry up!

(As JESUS reaches the top of the hill, he collapses.)

48 See John 19:14. The sixth hour would normally refer to noon. Therefore, the crucifixion followed this time of day.

49 According to tradition, the crucified only carried the horizontal beam (*patibulum*) to the place of execution, where the vertical beams were already inserted in the ground. After the individual's arms or hands were fastened to the horizontal beam, this piece was attached to the vertical pole by the use of a groove in the wood. Lastly, their legs and feet were attached to the vertical beam (F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: introduction, exposition and notes* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 366; M.J. Harris, *John* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 314; S.K. Ray, *St. John's Gospel* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2002), 342).

(The four SOLDIERS take the two CRIMINALS and hold them down onto two wooden beams on the ground. Starting with one CRIMINAL, a SOLDIER swings a hammer downwards and slashes a nail through his wrist, pinning him to the wooden beam. The screech of the CRIMINAL penetrates the auditorium and blood gushes from his wrist. This horrendous deed is repeated as his other wrist is fastened to the beam.)

(Terrified, the next CRIMINAL tries desperately to loosen himself from the grip of the SOLDIERS, but he too is slammed to the ground and violently nailed to the wooden beam. With this, they are lifted up and fastened to the poles in the ground, exposing their nude and broken bodies,⁵⁰ after which they are also nailed to the poles at their feet.)

(The SOLDIERS then take JESUS and shove him onto a wooden beam, ripping off the blood-stained robe, as well as his undergarment. As with the CRIMINALS before him, his wrists are violently nailed to the wooden beam.)

JESUS

(Releases a cry of pain.)

5. John 19:28–30⁵¹

5.1 Greek

Μετὰ τοῦτο εἰδὼς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἤδη πάντα τετέλεσται, ἵνα τελειωθῆ ἡ γραφή, λέγει· διψῶ. σκεῦος ἔκειτο ὄξους μεστόν· σπόγγον οὖν μεστόν τοῦ ὄξους ὑσσωπῶ περιθέντες προσήνεγκαν αὐτοῦ τῷ στόματι. ὅτε οὖν ἔλαβεν τὸ ὄξος [ὁ] Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν· τετέλεσται, καὶ κλίνας τὴν κεφαλὴν παρέδωκεν τὸ πνεῦμα.

50 See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 610 and J.H. Neyrey, *The Gospel of John in Cultural and Rhetorical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 610 on the nudity of the crucified.

51 Verses 28 to 30 mark the end of the crucifixion scene. While verse 31 does not contain a change in spatial setting, a temporal change marks it as beginning a new scene. The piercing of Jesus's side only ensues after a conversation between Pilate and the Jews (v.31), which indicates that some time has lapsed between his death and this event.

5.2 Narrative translation

After this, knowing that everything had already been completed, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus was saying, “I thirst.” A jar full of sour wine was standing [there]. So, placing a sponge full of sour wine on a hyssop branch, they brought it to his mouth. When he took the sour wine, Jesus said, “It has been completed,” and bowing his head, he gave up his spirit.

5.3 Performative translation

(JESUS’ eyes close and reopen, like someone fighting not to fall asleep.)

JESUS

[28] I ... thirst.

SOLDIER

(Derisively)

Give him some sour wine.

([29] The SOLDIERS dip a sponge on a hyssop branch into sour wine and bring it to JESUS’s mouth. He drinks of it. At this stage JESUS’s movements are slow and irregular. It is clear that he is barely alive.)

JESUS

[30] It ... has ... been ... completed.

(With this, JESUS’s head falls downwards, and he dies. While the SOLDIERS show no particular reaction, the CROWD roars and JESUS’s loved ones collapse at his feet and break down in tears.)

(One by one the CROWD begins leaving the stage, followed by the SOLDIERS. In a matter of seconds, the stage is nearly empty. All that remains is JESUS’s loved ones crying silently at the feet of his lifeless and naked body and the two unresponsive CRIMINALS hanging next to him.)

(The stage gradually darkens, until only the crucified protagonist is illuminated. Suddenly all is quiet.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF SCENE)

6. Exegetical notes on the performative translation

To an ancient Mediterranean audience, Jesus's death is not heroic nor beneficial, but one of defeat and ultimately dishonour.⁵² It is a slow and painful downfall accompanied by “bodily distortions,” “loss of bodily control,”⁵³ and nakedness.⁵⁴ The action in the scene they just witnessed was centred around that which would “normally be physical humiliation of a prisoner.”⁵⁵ The audience would recognise the crucifixion as one of the most pitiable ways to die. Unlike some ancient dramas, nature does not sympathise with the hero: there are no divine signs, no utterings from heaven, no natural disasters – just the hero dying a gruesome and lonesome death.⁵⁶

From a dramatic point of view, Jesus's death on the cross leaves behind a *θεατρον* of particularly dissatisfied audience members. This scene has failed to provide a moment of recovery (spark) which would have brought Jesus back into the fight for triumph. Instead, the protagonist's darkest hour just grew darker to the point where the Johannine drama's plot has unravelled into something almost unredeemable. Moreover, the presence of the protagonist has completely disappeared, and the antagonists seem to reign supreme.

52 Neyrey, *The Gospel of John*, 24.

53 Ibid., 413.

54 The humiliation of nakedness and the slow death were institutionalised methods of ensuring that the crucified be robbed of any form of heroic suffering (Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 243).

55 J.A. Brant, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 232.

56 M.W.G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 27. Cf. Mt. 27:51–52 (Jesus's death accompanied by the splitting of rocks, tearing of the temple curtain and raising of the dead), Mk. 15:38 (tearing of the temple curtain), and Lk. 23:44–45 (darkness and the tearing of the temple curtain). J. Jervell, *Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 56 states the reason for the absence of these events in the Johannine drama, is that, in the Fourth Gospel, “the spotlight is always on the person of Jesus”. Brant (*Dialogue and Drama*, 243) makes a similar argument, stating that, “in the Fourth Gospel, all eyes are upon the body or corpse on the cross, and attention is paid to the signs of suffering that set Jesus apart from others”.

The audience has become part “of what it otherwise cannot see or, in some cases, cannot normally bear to look at,”⁵⁷ by essentially being confronted with a protagonist from whom they feel alienated due to the imperfections of his fate.⁵⁸ The culturally-conditioned interpretation of the glorious tiding that the darkness will not master the light (1:5) and that ὁ λόγος will embody a good and abundant life which reflects the divine order, seems difficult to reconcile with the fact that Jesus hangs mastered by his enemies and dies a vulnerable death. A paradox ensues as the drama which set out to display the glory of God has unfolded as a tragedy.⁵⁹

The audience would recognise a tragedy as a drama which deals with “sorrowful or terrible events” in a serious way⁶⁰ and focuses on the suffering of a great figure.⁶¹ The hero of a tragedy usually suffers an unfortunate fate due to their own foolish and immoral actions⁶² or boastful pride (*hybris*).⁶³ The rhetorical effect of such a portrayal would be that the audience distances itself from the protagonist, which leads to the examination of the self and serves to reinforce the opposite behaviour than that of the protagonist.⁶⁴ Those on the side of the antagonist berating Jesus for making himself equal to God (5:18; 10:33; 19:7), labelling him as evil-doer (18:30), handing him over to be killed (18:35), choosing a bandit over him (18:40), flogging and mocking him (9:1, 3), and condemning him to crucifixion (19:6, 15) are thus creating a plausible point of view for the audience to identify with based on Jesus’s performance.

57 Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 71.

58 See Styan, *Drama, Stage, and Audience*, 228–229.

59 F.D. Bruner, *The Gospel of John. A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 28. Although the pain in a tragedy is felt by the characters on stage, it is shared by the audience and often intensified because it cannot necessarily be explained (J. L. Styan, *Drama. Guide to the Study of Plays* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 78).

60 R.K. Carver, *Stagecraft Fundamentals. A guide and reference for theatrical production* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2009), 20.

61 A.H. Sommerstein, *Greek Drama and Dramatists* (London: Routledge, 2002), 15.

62 W.B. Worthen, *The Harcourt Brace Anthology of Drama* (3rd ed. Orlando: Harcourt Brace College, 2000), 8.

63 Fink, *Dramatic Story Structure*, 61.

64 N. Croally, “Tragedy’s Teaching,” In J. Gregory (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 67.

On the other side, the audience is confronted with the incomprehensible point of view of the Fourth Evangelist who seems to dress the horrific events of the climax in glorious terms and exhorts the audience to make a choice for the protagonist (1:12; 20:30–31). Instead of adjusting his point of view to that of failure and shame, the Evangelist maintains that the glory of God has just been displayed through that which the audience witnessed (1:14; 12:23–25, 27–28; 17:1), essentially collapsing the suffering and glorification of Jesus into one another.⁶⁵ The audience members are therefore caught off guard as the glory promised by the narrator in the prologue, seems to have unfolded as a “*crucified glory*”,⁶⁶ which finds its ultimate manifestation in the crucifixion scene, where neither fame (κλέος) nor honour (τιμή) are present.⁶⁷ As Jesus’s vulnerability intensifies, the Evangelist seems to insist that God’s glory not only remains present, but increases.⁶⁸

Intensifying the audience’s struggle with the performance is that the genre does not fit the content. The choice of tragedy for a drama in which God is revealed is inappropriate to say the least – especially in the case where God becomes the object of the tragedy. Moreover, the audience was not adequately prepared for this by the prologue. Where tragedies commonly began with a catastrophic error on the side of the protagonist,⁶⁹ the Johannine prologue paints the protagonist in a virtuous and glory-filled way, triggering expectations about the Messiah, σοφία (Wisdom), and the divine.⁷⁰

If becoming the implied audience involves adapting to the point of view of the Evangelist,⁷¹ the audience will have to make sense of the Johannine

65 Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible*, 175.

66 A.J. Köstenberger, *A theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 186.

67 Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 262.

68 Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 609.

69 J.L. Styan, *Drama. Guide to the Study of Plays* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 68.

70 Characterisation and its effect on an audience is explored through analysis of the “foreknowledge” about certain characters (Keuris, *The Play*, 25). This foreknowledge refers to the pre-performance information or perceptions that the audience has of the character(s) at hand and it becomes especially significant in plays which contain religious, mythological, or historical characters.

71 Lategan, “New Testament hermeneutics (Part II): Mapping the hermeneutical process,” in A. du Toit (ed.), *Focusing on the Message. New Testament hermeneutics, exegesis*

drama in an alternative way and reconcile the tragic and vulnerable anti-climax of the Johannine drama with the Evangelist's point of view of glory (δόξα), which he seems to be gradually massaging in throughout the drama.

7. Evaluations of drama criticism

While the above example is but a sample of an analysis that covers nearly three chapters of the Fourth Gospel, it brings the audience's interaction with the text to the fore in a way that highlights often-underplayed dimensions, like the evaluation of the protagonist's performance against culturally-conditioned foreknowledge about him(/her), the theological implications of genre, and a contextualised audience's emotions at the height or climax of the drama.

Although the experience of the hypothetical audience is nothing more than an informed guess, it helps the exegete to involve her/himself in the text in a more emotive and experiential way. Moreover, such a hypothetical construction can serve to create various "audience scenarios"⁷² with which to imagine the performative event of the drama of a biblical text. This opens the interpretational possibility to witness the Johannine drama through the eyes of our own communities, social or cultural groups, embodied experiences, et cetera.

By becoming aware of a first-time hypothetical audience, a drama analysis can also be helpful to allow the reader to escape their familiarity with the text and experience it in a new way. Additionally, the communal nature of the hypothetical audience highlights that biblical texts were not read and interpreted in isolation, but that various individuals' biographies function as a story within a bigger drama.⁷³

and methods (Pretoria: Protea, 2009), 88; Powell, "Narrative Criticism," in J.B. Green (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for interpretation* (2nd Edition, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans), 242; D.F. Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives: A Practical Guide* (London: International Scholars, 1999), 8.

72 Rhoads, "What is Performance Criticism," 92.

73 M.A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 89 also makes this argument in line with narrative criticism.

Finally, the most profound contribution of a drama analysis of the Fourth Gospel is that it brings the text to life in a new way.⁷⁴ As interpreter, I was stimulated to have an experience with the text that was enjoyable, and might I risk saying, entertaining.⁷⁵ Rhoads, who explored the avenue of performance criticism,⁷⁶ emphasises that biblical texts were essentially composed for public reading and storytelling, which would have been “animated, emotional, and engaging.”⁷⁷ Stimulating, entertaining, and creative methodologies to biblical studies therefore need not be “a problem for biblical hermeneutics, but its ultimate aim.”⁷⁸ The ecclesial and missional potential of a performative translation is thus something to anticipate.

However, just as drama criticism opens up certain hermeneutical possibilities, it closes others.⁷⁹ Being a biblical scholar, and being aware of the dangers of anachronism, I have to admit that this translating and reading process has its shortcomings. Not only does it impose modern drama theory on an ancient text, but it builds a hypothetical first-century world through a twenty-first century lens. Similar to narrative criticism,⁸⁰ drama analysis blurs the lines between modern and ancient performative study by using tools from modern drama theory to analyse ancient texts,⁸¹ and underplays the unique elements of the ancient Greek drama that were

74 See Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing*, 307.

75 It needs to be emphasised that the enjoyment of scripture in no way undermines its existential importance and seriousness. Dewey, “Performing the Living Word,” 146 makes this point by arguing that “important” and “fun” are not mutually exclusive concepts. Styan, *Drama, Stage, and Audience*, 239 argues along the same line when emphasising the power of a drama to challenge and move an audience on an existential level in the name of “recreation and entertainment”.

76 Rhoads, “The Art of Translating for Oral Performance,” 27.

77 Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part I,” 120 argues that performance criticism opens the interpreter up to the “emotive and kinetic” dimensions of a text.

78 B.C. Lategan, “Current Issues in the Hermeneutical Debate.” *Neotestamentica* 18 (1984):17.

79 Cf. Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism*, 146.

80 See Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism*, 93.

81 Rhoads, “Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part I,” 119.

germane to the first-century context of the Gospel of John.⁸² Moreover, there is no evidence that the Fourth Gospel was composed to be performed as a drama and the contemporary reader cannot know how biblical texts were heard in the first century.⁸³ Therefore, interpretations of tone, attitudes, facial and bodily expressions, et cetera, can surely be subject to anachronistic exaggeration or misunderstanding due to the various barriers of language and culture that stand between ancient and modern audiences.⁸⁴

Additionally, the influence of the interpreter's perspective in a drama analysis problematises the exercise. As experience is drenched in subjectivity, so is the outcome of a drama analysis. No two individuals will walk out of a theatre performance having come to exactly the same conclusions. Rightfully so, there are scholars who warn that the reading of the Gospel of John through a drama lens could become ideologically driven,⁸⁵ and yield to the interpreter's preconceived convictions and conclusions.⁸⁶ However, Powell⁸⁷ seeks to remind us that any interpretative methodology runs this risk.⁸⁸

8. Concluding thoughts – a way forward?

Perry defines the basic steps of performance criticism as preparation (preparing the text for performance), internalisation (memorising the translation) and performance.⁸⁹ This article reflects on the first step in this process by providing two excerpts (John 19:78–18, 28–30) from a larger

82 Rhoads in *ibid.*, 119 asks the question: “How can we distinguish ancient from modern sensibilities in relation to performance?” The accusation of anachronistically using modern methodology (and even technology) to analyse ancient texts is especially valid in this study's appropriation of drama criticism, as modern elements such as sound and lighting was referenced, where some elements of ancient drama, like choruses and masks, were ignored.

83 Hearon, “The Implications of Orality for Studies of the Biblical Text,” 13.

84 D.L. Barr, *New Testament Story. An Introduction* (3rd Edition, Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002), 17–18.

85 Brant, *Dialogue and Drama*, 80.

86 Swanson, “Taking Place/Taking Up Space,” 185.

87 Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism*, 96.

88 Cf. Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible*, 238.

89 Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism*, 39.

study experimenting with a performative translation and analysis of three scenes within the Fourth Gospel. Such an exercise carries the potential to do more than bear fruit on paper, but to transpire in performance, which becomes “domesticated for today’s context”⁹⁰ and comes alive in an oral manner.⁹¹ These performances have the potential to take revelation beyond paper and literacy, and to serve orally-oriented and even illiterate individuals and groups.

The way forward would thus be embodiment and performance. Not with the aim of reconstructing ancient events, as this is impossible, but with the aim of hearing the Gospel anew – touching it, seeing it played out, encountering it in a communal sense, being excited, surprised and even offended by it – and allowing God to perform through our bodies.

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90 Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing*, 308.

91 How different would the nineteenth century’s missional activities of the Glasgow Missionary Society in South Africa have been if, instead of solely focussing on Xhosa translations of the Bible and emphasising the importance of literacy among the Xhosa people (cf. K. Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics. Oral and written culture in Africa and beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 151), the missionaries added a performative dimension to their evangelism?

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