

CompLit 9511A
Erotomachia: The Battle of the Sexes from Aristophanes
to Spike Lee

Fall 2020
WESTERN UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

Instructor: Professor James Miller (jmiller@uwo.ca)
Time: Wednesdays, 9:30am-12:20pm

Office hours: by appointment
Location: Online via Zoom



Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*, c 1483. Tempera on panel.

Course Description

In Botticelli's famous painting of Venus and Mars, the Goddess of Love casts a serenely victorious glance at the disarmed and dismounted God of War while mischievous satyrs mock his amorous might by donning his mighty armour, capturing his phallic lance, and blowing a conch in his ear. Will he heed their alarming wake-up call? Despite his commanding physique Mars seems blissfully unaware of his defeat on the battlefield of love. Venus has clearly won this round in the Battle of the Sexes.

Behind Botticelli's ironically peaceful scene of sexual triumph lies a provocative tradition of imagining the erotic life as a conflict, a problematic "conceit" originating in the ancient allegory of the Erotomachia ("Sex War"). In this graduate course for the Comparative Literature program, we shall trace this Western cultural tradition back to its narrative origins in classical literature and then follow its cultural elaborations through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the Enlightenment and the Modern period.

The private clash between Venus and Mars, which became a world-conquering mission for Ovid's Cupid, will blast the afterlife of Dante's Francesca and Paolo; ignite the conflict between Shakespeare's Kate and Petruchio; fire up Mozart's Queen of the Night against the sunny order of Sarastro; drive Bizet's Carmen to the arena of blood-sacrifice; and herald the defiant

affirmation of female empowerment in Pat Benatar’s pop-anthems “Love is a Battlefield” and “Hit Me with Your Best Shot.”

Variations of the allegory will be studied in a variety of literary genres and artistic media on both sides of the contentious border between Word and Image. With the perpetual clash between erudite and popular culture in the dialectical background, our critical momentum in the course will be comparative and intermedial. As its subtitle suggests, the course is bookended by a close reading of an old comedy by Aristophanes --



which will be compared and contrasted with a contemporary intersectional adaptation of the Athenian “Sex Strike” plot to the Race/ Gender divides in Spike Lee’s Chicago.



The course is designed to focus critical attention on the cultural value of the Erotomachia as an enduring meme by which gender troubles may be trumpeted, sexual hierarchies destabilized, political forces marshaled, and sexual violence confronted.



Jean-Louis David, *L'intervention des Sabines* (1799)

Learning Outcomes

1. Enhanced skills in thinking and writing critically about cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity
2. Interpretive confidence in the application of two theoretical concepts of narrative evolution (Structuralist “mythemes” and Poststructuralist “memes”) to the close analysis of literary and visual representations of gender conflict
3. Detailed comprehension of the development of a major metaphor of heterosexual eroticism from its classical origins through all the major periods in Western cultural history

4. Historical insight into aggressive and defensive strategies adopted by opposing groups on the battleground of sexual politics
5. Judicious understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of various proposals for resolving gender conflict in courtship, marriage, divorce

Grade Breakdown

Take-home Test (due: Oct 7).....	25%
Presentation (Weeks Six to Fourteen).....	25%
Long Essay (due: Dec 16)	50%



Pentheus torn apart by Agave and Ino. Lid of an Attic red-figure bowl, ca. 450-425 BC.

Contact

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Schedule of Topics and Readings

Week One: Eros and Machē → Achilles and Penthesilea, Paris and Helen

Sept 9 – Mythic Prototypes of the Erotomachia

Homer, *Iliad* book III (“Helen reviews the troops”) [scan]

Sappho, “Hymn to Aphrodite” (concept of erotic *symmachos*) [scan]

Week Two: Mythemes and Memes

Sept 16 – Lévi-Strauss, “The Structure of Myths” (1958) [scan]

Dawkins, excerpts from *The Selfish Gene* (1976) [scan]

Week Three: The Comic Erotomachia → Lysistrata and the Magistrate

Sept 23 – Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* [paperback]

Week Four: The Tragic Erotomachia → Pentheus and Agave

Sept 30 – Euripides, *Bacchae* [paperback]

→ take-home essay question uploaded to OWL

Week Five: The Lyric Erotomachia → Venus and Mars, Orpheus and Euridice

Oct 7 – Ovid, *Art of Love* (Rape of the Sabine Women) [scan]

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4 (Vulcan’s trap, Venus’s revenge) [online]

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10-11 (the two deaths of Orpheus) [online]

→ submit PDF of your take-home essay to jmiller@uwo.ca

Week Six: The Chivalric Erotomachia → Venus and Mars

Oct 14 – *Romance of the Rose* (the siege of the Castle of Jealousy) [scan]

Week Seven: The Apocalyptic Erotomachia

Oct 21 – *Inferno* 5 (the damnation of the Lustful) [scan]

Purgatorio 30 (the triumph of Beatrice) [scan]

Week Eight: The Political Erotomachia

Oct 28 – *La Cazzaria* (sexual politics as genital warfare) [scan]

Week Nine: FALL STUDY BREAK

Nov 4 – no class

Week Ten: The Marital Erotomachia

Nov 11: Shakespeare – Taming of the Shrew [online]

Week Eleven: The Libertine Erotomachia

Nov 18 – Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons* [paperback]

Sade: Philosophy in the Bedroom [scan]

Week Twelve: The Operatic Erotomachia

Nov 25 – Mozart, *The Magic Flute*: The Queen of the Night's Aria [YouTube]

Bizet's *Carmen*: The Opera Theatre as Sacrificial Arena [YouTube]

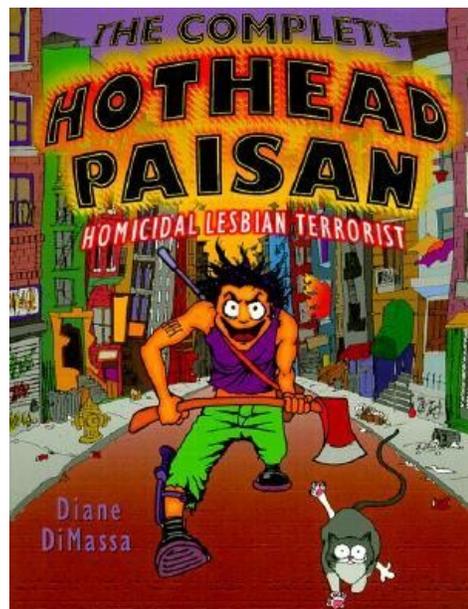
Week Thirteen: The Feminist Erotomachia: Modern Bacchants

Dec 2 – Valerie Solanas, *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto* [online]

Hothead Paisan [scan]

Week Fourteen: The BLM Erotomachia: Modern Pacifists

Dec 9 – Spike Lee, *Chi-raq*



Required Readings

1. *Battle of the Sexes: Selected Readings* [scan]
 - a. Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth” [from *Structural Anthropology*]
 - b. Richard Dawkins, “Memes: The New Replicators” [from *The Selfish Gene*]
 - c. Richard Dawkins, “The Battle of the Sexes” [from *The Selfish Gene*]
 - d. Homer, *Iliad*, Book III (“Helen reviews the troops”)
 - e. Sappho, “Hymn to Aphrodite”
 - f. Ovid, *Art of Love* [*Ars amatoria*], Book 1
 - g. Guillaume de Lorris, *Romance of the Rose* I (“The Garden, the Fountain, & the Rose”)
 - h. Jean de Meun, *Romance of the Rose* II (“The Overthrow of Reason”)
 - i. Dante, *Inferno* 5 (the damnation of the Lustful)
 - j. Dante, *Purgatorio* 30 (the triumph of Beatrice)
 - k. Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria: The Book of the Prick* (excerpts)
 - l. Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (prologue: “To Libertines”)
 - m. Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (three excerpts)
 - n. Diane DiMassa, *Hothead Paisan* [excerpts]

2. Aristophanes, *Lysistrata and Other Plays*. Trans. Alan H. Sommerstein
Translation to purchase online:
Publisher: Penguin Classics; Revised ed. edition (April 29 2003)
ISBN-10: 9780140448146 **ISBN-13:** 978-0140448146

3. Euripides, *The Bacchae and Other Plays*. Trans. John Davie.
Translation to purchase online:
Publisher: Penguin Classics (July 25 2006)
ISBN-10: 0140447261 **ISBN-13:** 978-0140447262

4. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book 4, Books 9-10. Trans. A. S. Kline
online translation:
<https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph.htm>

5. William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew* [free online text available]
<https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/the-taming-of-the-shrew/induction-scene-1/>

recommended: Stratford Ontario Production on Youtube

6. Choderlos de Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons*. Trans. Helen Constantine
Translation to purchase online:
Publisher: Penguin Classics; Penguin Classics edition (September 30, 2007)
ASIN: B00HTJU8JI
7. Valerie Solanas, *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto* [free online text available]
PDF: http://kunsthallezurich.ch/sites/default/files/scum_manifesto.pdf

Required Screenings

On YouTube:

1. Mozart, *The Magic Flute*: The Queen of the Night's Aria [innumerable performances]
recommended performance: Diana Damrau, The Royal Opera
2. Bizet's *Carmen* [with Placido Domingo and Julia Migenes-Johnson]
search for: Carmen – opera filmed as movie [2 hours, 26 minutes]

On Prime Video:

3. Spike Lee, *Chi-Raq*
[NB: If you sign up for a trial month of Prime Video, you can watch the film for free]