

CompLit 9XXX
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:

Office hours: by appointment
Location: TBA



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 and its diverse “queerings” from its classical origins through 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, and divorce.



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

