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 her lover, 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, an ancient allegory known as the Erotomachia (“Sex War”). In this course we shall trace this tradition back to its narrative origins in classical mythology and then follow its cultural elaborations through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the Modern period. The private clash between Venus and Mars will become a world-conquering mission for Ovid’s Cupid. Its passionate energy 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 high culture and pop culture. Particular attention will be given to the 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, and divorce
Grade Breakdown

YouTube Video Review (due Oct 9) .................. 10% → Learning Outcome 1
Midterm Test (on Oct 23) ............................. 15% → Learning Outcome 2
5-page Essay (due Dec 2) ............................ 25% → Learning Outcomes 1, 2, 3, 4
Final Examination ..................................... 50% → Learning Outcomes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Required Texts
1. *Battle of the Sexes*: Coursepack of Selected Readings
2. Euripides, *The Bacchae* [online text in translation]
3. Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew* [online text]
5. Valerie Solanas, *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto* [online text]

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

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Statement on Academic Policies
The Department of Modern Languages and Literatures Policies which govern the conduct, standards, and expectations for student participation in Modern Languages and Literatures courses is available in the Undergraduate section of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures website at http://www.uwo.ca/modlang/undergraduate/policies.html. It is your responsibility to understand the policies set out by the Senate and the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, and thus ignorance of these policies cannot be used as grounds of appeal.
Schedule of Topics and Readings

Week One: Eros and Machē

Sept 4 – Mythic Prototypes of the Eromachia

Week Two: Mythemes and Memes

Sept 9 – Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structure of Myths” (1958)
Sept 11 – Dawkins, excerpt from The Selfish Gene (1976)

Week Three: Paris and Helen

Sept 16 – Homer, Iliad book III (“Helen reviews the troops”)
Sept 18 – Sappho, “Hymn to Aphrodite” (concept of erotic symmachos)

Week Four: Pentheus and Agave

Sept 23 – Euripides, The Bacchae (with its prelude, the myth of Semele)
Sept 25 – Euripides, The Bacchae (the sparagmos of Pentheus)

Week Five: Orpheus and Euridice

Sept 30 – Ovid, Art of Love (Rape of the Sabine Women)
Oct 2 – Ovid, Metamorphoses 10-11 (the two deaths of Orpheus)

Week Six: Venus and Mars / The Chivalric Erotomachia

Oct 7 – Ovid, Metamorphoses 4 (Vulcan’s trap, Venus’s revenge)
Oct 9 – Ovid and the Roman de la Rose: Intro to Chivalric Tradition
→ YouTube Video Assignment due

Week Seven: The Chivalric Erotomachia / The Divine Erotomachia

Oct 14 – Hour 1: Romance of the Rose (the siege of the Castle of Jealousy)
Hour 2: Inferno 5 (the damnation of the Lustful)
Oct 16 – Purgatorio 30 (the triumph of Beatrice)

Week Eight: The Political Erotomachia

Oct 21 – La Cazzaria (sexual politics as genital warfare)
Oct 23 – Midterm Test
Week Nine: The Marital Erotomachia

  Oct 28 – Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*
  Oct 30 – Fall Study Break

Week Ten: The Libertine Erotomachia

  Nov 4 – Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons*
  Nov 6 – Laclos and Sade: Philosophy in the Bedroom

Week Eleven: The Operatic Erotomachia

  Nov 11 – Mozart’s Queen of the Night
  Nov 13 – Bizet’s Carmen: The Opera Theatre as Sacrificial Arena

Week Twelve: Modern Bacchants

  Nov 18 – Jean Cocteau’s *Orfée*
  Nov 20 – Rob Marshall’s *Chicago* (The Cell Block Tango)

Week Twelve: The Feminist Erotomachia

  Nov 25 – Valerie Solanas, *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto*
  Nov 27 – Marilyn Frye, “Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement”

Week Thirteen:

  Dec 2 – Diane DiMassa, *Hothead Paisan*

⇒5-page Essay Due