Our notions of romance originated in the medieval phenomenon sometimes called “courtly love,” a usually illicit and often fatal passion between unequals, such as a queen and a knight, at a feudal court. Late medieval Italian writers translated this aristocratic paradigm into the urban setting of the city-states of the Italian peninsula. In the recuperation of antiquity that started with Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, erotic poetry and political thought were made to overlap. Dante’s heavenly Beatrice and unhappy Francesca are tales of love in cities. Petrarch’s Laura, met in Avignon, parallels his idea of Rome. The ten young narrators of Boccaccio’s Decameron tell tales of sex, marriage and adultery in their city of Florence before it was decimated by the plague. The English poet Chaucer adapts this Italian tradition in his tragic romance, Troilus and Criseyde, set in the doomed city of Troy. In the Renaissance Machiavelli applies his political insights to an urban plot of seduction in his play, The Mandrake, modelled on Roman comedies. This course will follow the thread of sex and the city from ancient texts (Plato’s Symposium, Aristotle’s Politics, Terence’s Andria, Ovid’s Art of Love, and Augustine’s Confessions and City of God) to the noble Parisian prostitute of Verdi’s Traviata, an urban sex-worker with a Platonic idea of self-sacrificing love.

This course looks at a predominant cultural paradigm still in full vigor today – the love story – against its particular European history. The love story in the West is a locus where different allegiances typically come into conflict with one another, so that it is virtually always a meditation on society and the individual as well as the individual and his God. Sex is both foundational to the city and disruptive to it as individual passion leads in directions often exactly contrary to societal norms and religious or philosophical conceptions of what is good. Extra-marital liaisons became almost the exclusive theme of popular literature in the French Middle Ages in what C.S. Lewis explained as love’s “truancy” from the actual exigencies of society and religion. At the same time, Plato’s long shadow offered the constant possibility that love could exalt as well as ruin. The central moment of Sex and the City is the late medieval Italian appropriation and transformation of two dominant influences: classical antiquity and French popular culture. Thus it will start with foundational texts by Plato, Aristotle, Terence, Virgil, Ovid, and Augustine, already in view of their later reception; for example, considering Plato together with the neoplatonism of Castiglione’s Renaissance classic, The Courtier, Machiavelli’s translation of the Roman comedy, Andria, in view of his own politically charged Mandrake, Aristotle’s Politics in the medieval commentary of Thomas Aquinas, Ovid’s Art of Love as adapted by the influential treatise of a twelfth-century French clergyman. The revival of antiquity associated with what is often called the Renaissance can be credited to the three foundational authors of the Italian language, Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, who were all steeped in the erotic literary genres of romance and lyric. Their conflation of these two influences is a significant part of their legacy, received as a new sort of canon already by Chaucer still in the fourteenth century. The course will close with Giuseppe Verdi’s La Traviata, where in the context of nineteenth-century Paris and another widely influential Italian genre, opera, we can find a new spin on the familiar elements of romance, family, society, monetized lust and ennobling love.

Sex and the City aims to fulfill the goals of the Texts and Ideas branch of the College Core Curriculum in introducing students to the ideals of liberal education, in which foundational texts are studied for their resonance in subsequent times and places, especially our own. No narrative is more ubiquitous in popular culture than the love story and every philosophy has to account for the power of eros. Sex and the City explores the way in which literary genres and philosophical ideas
influence each other from ancient Athens to nineteenth-century Paris, through the key cultural connector of medieval and Renaissance Italy.

Some of the questions the course will consider are:

1. How do personal affections constitute or escape the foundational order of society?
2. How does sex underlie basic conceptions of how society is or ought to be structured?
3. How do notions of Platonic, romantic, or ecstatic love upend normal relations of power?
4. How are Western notions of romantic love in tension with institutions of marriage and kinship?
5. Is the family like a small state, or is the state like a big family?
6. What are the political stakes of love poetry?
7. How can erotic paradigms inform political ideals or phenomena?
8. What are the parallels between amorous and territorial conquest?
9. Are love and marriage incompatible?
10. How do tales of extra-marital, adulterous liaisons operate within the cultural norms that sustain order in the political community?
11. How is a city different from a court and how does that difference affect the discourse of love, sex, and marriage?
12. Why are literary texts so often about love? Are they ever (or always) also political?

INSTRUCTORS’ CONTACT DETAILS

Alison Cornish, (ac7041@nyu.edu)
Office hour: Tues 2-4, Casa Italiana

Recitation instructors:

Emily Antenucci (Italian) eca302@nyu.edu
Elizabeth Anne Kirby (French) eak478@nyu.edu

REQUIREMENTS AND ASSESSMENTS

General requirements

- **Attendance and participation are required at all lectures and all recitation meetings.** Students are expected to have read the material by the day for which it is assigned, to be prepared to contribute to discussion during the lectures and to participate actively during the recitations.
- Your must notify your recitation instructor by email if you will not be able to attend a class because of a religious holiday or an illness or emergency. **A failing grade may be assigned to any student with a combined total of three unjustified absences from lectures and/or recitations.**
- **No late work will be accepted.**
- Use of electronic devices in class is **not permitted.**
• Be sure to contact one of the instructors (contact details above) if there are factors internal or external to the course that you feel are affecting your performance. Don’t leave any problems until the end of the course when they might be too late to remedy. We are keen to ensure that all students get the most out of the course and perform to the best of their potential.

Assessment

25% Attendance and participation in lecture and recitation.

This grade includes a number of very short writing exercises or spot papers (1-2 pages long) over the course of the semester, usually due electronically on Sunday evenings, which may also be workshopped in recitation. Students will also be asked to take responsibility for leading or facilitating discussion at recitation meetings.

10% Online quizzes on reading.
These are multiple-choice quizzes designed mainly to help students keep up with the reading.

15% Creative project.
This is a writing/video assignment (4-6 pages/3-5 minutes) reflecting on a specific contemporary cultural phenomenon as it would be understood or critiqued by one of the authors we have read.

15% Two formal papers

15% Mid-term exam. Identification, short answer, and short essay.

20% Final exam. Identification, short answer, and short essay

N.B. The total number of pages written for the course, including one-page spot papers, must add up to 20.

Exam dates

Mid-term exam: Tuesday, Oct 24
Final exam: Thursday, December 21st, 12:00-1:50 pm

Deadlines for graded written work

Creative project due: Sunday, October 15

Paper due dates: Sunday Nov 19 and Sunday, December 10 Tuesday, Dec 12

BOOKS FOR PURCHASE

The following books are required for purchase for this course. Copies are available from the NYU Bookstore. Since no electronic devices are permitted in class, you must purchase paper copies of the books to bring with you to class.

Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics* (Hackett) ISBN 0872208699

*The Comedies of Machiavelli* (Hackett) ISBN 0872209016


St. Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality (CUA) ISBN 081320867X


*The Essential Petrarch* (Hackett) ISBN 978-1603842884


*Other editions of the Divine Comedy are acceptable, but you will need all three parts (Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso).*

I.Sept 5-7

  **Tuesday**. Introduction
  **Thursday**. Plato, *Symposium*, pp. 1-73

II.Sept 12-14

  **Tuesday**. Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics*, I.1,10; II.1, 2, pp. 4-19, 66-74, 78-95

III.Sept 19-21


IV.Sept 26-28

  **Tuesday**. Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book I.657-756 [from line 895 to end in Fitzgerald translation], Book IV; trans. Fitzgerald, pp. 27-30, 96-121 [pdf]
  **Thursday** Augustine, *On Marriage and Sexuality* 13-78

V.Oct 3-5

  **Tuesday**. Andreas Capellanus in Boccaccio, *Decameron* (Norton), 358-367
  **Thursday**. Dante, *La Vita nuova/The New Life* (Dover dual lang ed.) pp. 23-295, or 1-97 (the whole book)

VI.Oct 10-12

  **Tuesday**. Dante, *Inferno* cantos 1-5
  **Thursday**. Dante, *Inferno* cantos 15-16, 18-19
Creative project due Sunday, October 15

VII.Oct 17-19

**Tuesday.** Dante, *Purgatorio* cantos 5, 26-27, 30-31.


VIII.Oct 24-26

**Tuesday.** Mid-Term examination


IX.Oct 31-Nov 2

**Tuesday.** Boccaccio, *Decameron* III.1, V.4, VI.7, VII.5, VII.8, IX.2, IX.3 (pp. 94-98, 156-160, 185-187, 218-223, 279-282)

**Thursday**. Boccaccio, *Decameron* X.4, X.9, X.10, Author’s Conclusion; Petrarch on Griselda (pp. 302-307, 318-345, 355-357)

X.Nov 7-9

**Tuesday.** *The Essential Petrarch*, Letter to Posterity (pp. 237-244), Poems 1, 3, 4, 7, 10, 16, 132, 134, 136, 139; *Secretum* III (pp. 160-203)

**Thursday**. *The Essential Petrarch*, Letter to Giacomo Colonna (Fam 2.9, pp. 206-212); Letter 2 (verse letters 1.6, pp. 213-219); Poems 53, 128, 267, 346, 360, 362, 366

XI.Nov 14-16

**Tuesday.** Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* Bks 1-3

**Thursday**. Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* Bks 4-5

Paper due Sunday Nov 19

X.Nov 21


[Thanksgiving]

XI.Nov 28-30

**Tuesday.** Machiavelli, *Mandragola* Acts I-III (pp.153-229)


XI.Dec 5-7

**Tuesday.** *La Traviata* Acts I-II.1, pp.9-34; excerpts from Alexandre Dumas, fils, *The Lady of the Camellias* ch. 16 (147-157), ch.20 (182-188 [pdf]. Watch Willy Decker's production of *La Traviata* (On Demand through Bobst).


XII.Dec 12-14
Tuesday Dec 12 NO CLASS Legislative Day: Classes will meet according to a Monday schedule

Paper due Tuesday, December 12
Thursday. Last class: Conclusion

Final exam date: Thursday, December 21st, 12:00-1:50 p.m