



Sex and Politics in the Ancient World

Instructor: Prof. Mira Balberg

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Online office hours (via Zoom): MW 11-12 or by request

Description and goals

The course explores how sexual conduct and sexual morality were discussed and debated in ancient Greece and Rome in relation to changing political realities, beginning with the Homeric age and concluding with the Christianization of the Roman empire. Focusing

on cultural history, the course covers a range of genres – epic poems, philosophical treatises, tragedies and comedies, romance novels, sermons, history books, letters, and more – and uses them as windows through which changing attitudes toward sexuality can be understood within their historical contexts.

Content warning: *The materials in this course include some issues and themes that could be very upsetting and offensive, among them sexual violence, homophobia and misogyny, incest, prostitution, and sexual slavery. In addition, on occasion the course will include some graphic images and/or language depicting sexual acts or body parts. If for any reason you are uncomfortable engaging with such materials, you are strongly advised not to take this course.*

Course objectives

1. You will understand the discipline and practice of cultural history by working with a wide range of ancient literary sources and learning how to mine them for historical information.
2. You will acquire good historical literacy in key elements of Greek, Roman, and early Christian history.
3. You will improve your ability for close reading and analysis of primary historical sources.
4. You will improve your written communication skills by submitting well-structured, concise, and well-argued essays that include thesis statements and presentation of evidence.

Course online format

Online learning requires much organization and self-discipline from both the professor and the students, and we will all have to do our best in this unfamiliar situation. It is my responsibility to help you learn as much as possible, in the most effective and enjoyable way possible; it is your responsibility to keep up with the readings and stay involved and engaged even though you are not showing up for class in person.

The lectures for this class are going to be pre-recorded and posted on Canvas so you can watch them at your convenience. Research shows that no one can concentrate on a recorded lecture of 50 minutes, so lectures are usually going to be broken down into smaller segments of about 15-20 minutes each.

The lectures for each week are going to be posted (on the Media Gallery on Canvas) for two weeks only. The idea here is to encourage you to keep up with the course instead of postponing watching the lectures until the last minute, which would be counterproductive to your success in the course. It is also meant to decrease your dependence on the lectures when you write your essays. I don't want you to quote me, I want to see what you understood and took from the lectures.

The PowerPoint slides, however, will remain available to you throughout the quarter (on Canvas under "files").

Under no circumstances are you allowed to post the lectures or the presentations *anywhere* or distribute them to people who are not enrolled in the course – this is a violation of intellectual property laws.

The readings are a crucial part of this course. When readings are assigned in conjunction with a lecture, it means they will be necessary for understanding the lecture. Your midterm and final essays will also rely heavily on the readings. To help you keep up with the readings, there is going to be a quiz every week (on Canvas) on the readings for the class. There are going to be 10 quizzes throughout the quarter, each worth 3% of your grade (30% total). Readings are posted on Canvas under “files.”

I will hold regular office hours via Zoom on Mondays and Wednesdays between 11-12. I am also open to scheduling online meetings at other times via Zoom or Skype. Please don't hesitate to contact me. The course will also have a discussion board in which you are welcome to post comments and questions, and I will do my best to respond.

Requirements and evaluation

Materials:

Almost all course materials are be posted on Canvas. In addition, you are asked to read two (short) books:

- Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*
- Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*

The bookstore has hard copies of those books and has free shipping. If you prefer electronic copies, you can access those through the Course Reserves on Canvas.

Evaluation:

In addition to the quizzes, you will be evaluated based on a midterm essay and a final essay. The midterm and final essays will each consist of one question that will synthesize the material studied in the course, and they will have heavy emphasis on the texts we've been reading. You will have access to all class materials while writing these essays. Please note that all your submissions will be monitored through a plagiarism detection software (Turnitin).

The final grade will be calculated in the following way:

Assignment	% of the grade
Midterm (due week 6)	35%
Final essay (finals week)	35%
Quizzes (every Friday)	30%

Weekly Tasks

Week I (M 3/30 – 4/3)

1. Sex, Politics, and History

Watch
a. Introduction
b. What's sex got to do with politics
c. Does Sex have a history?

2. *Mythical Origins: divine desire*

Watch	Read
a. Ancient Greece: fertility and religion	
b. Sexuality and the gods	Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite

3. *Mythical origins: men, women, marriage*

Watch	Read
a. Archaic Greece	
b. Hesiod and the creation of woman	Excerpts from Hesiod, <i>Theogony</i> and <i>Works and Day</i>
c. Love and marriage in Homer	Homer, <i>The Odyssey</i> , book 23

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Quiz 1	Friday 4/3 by 2 pm

Week II (4/6–4/10)4. *Archaic Greece: drinking, singing, gazing*

Watch	Read
a. Greek Aristocracy and the Symposium	Selected poems of Sappho and Theognis
b. Pederastic culture?	
c. Love between women	

5. *Interpreting erotic pottery*

* Note: Explicit visuals, discussion of sexual activity

Watch
a. Athenian pottery
b. Erotic images in pottery
c. Women in the symposium

6. *Sexual politics under Athenian democracy: Men and Women*

Watch	Read
a. Solon's reforms	
b. The rise of Athenian democracy	
c. The Athenian man and his household	Xenophon, <i>Oeconomicus</i> , 7-10

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Quiz 2	Friday 4/10 by 2 pm

Week III (4/13 – 4/17)7. *Sexual utopia (or dystopia)*

Watch	Read
a. Plato's political vision	
b. Marriage and sex in Plato's republic	Plato, <i>Republic</i> , excerpt from Book 5
c. Utopia or dystopia?	

8. *Lysistrata: War, Peace, and Sex*

Watch	Read
a. Cultural and political background	
b. War of the sexes	Aristophanes, <i>Lysistrata</i>
c. Myrine and her husband	Aristophanes, <i>Lysistrata</i>
d. Sex as peacemaker	Aristophanes, <i>Lysistrata</i>

9. *What's Platonic about "Platonic love?"*

Watch	Read
a. Same-sex relations in classical Athens	Excerpts from <i>Plato's Symposium</i> (Phaedrus)
b. Two kinds of love	Excerpts from <i>Plato's Symposium</i> (Pausinias)
c. That's just the way we are	Excerpts from <i>Plato's Symposium</i> (Aristophanes)

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Quiz 3	Friday 4/17 by 2 pm

Week IV (4/20 – 4/24)10. *Theories of the body, male and female*

Watch
a. Hellenistic Transformations
b. Hippocratic medical theories
c. Aristotle and the one-sex theory

11. *The Hellenistic Period: nature and desire*

Watch	Read
a. What is Nature?	
b. Nature in Plato's <i>Laws</i>	Excerpts from Plato, <i>The Laws</i> , book VIII
c. Hellenistic philosophical schools	

12. Hellenistic Judaism: Biblical legacies and philosophical influences

Watch	Read
a. Judaism and Hellenism	
b. Philo: Logos and desire	Excerpts from Philo, <i>On the Creation of the World</i>
c. Testament of Reuben: Temptation and devotion	The Testament of Reuben

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Quiz 4	Friday 4/24 by 2 pm

Week V (4/27–5/1)

13. Republican and Augustan Rome I: vir and vis (man and power)

**Note: very explicit language, discussion of sexual activity*

Watch
a. The rise of Rome
b. sex and power relations in republican Rome
c. Roman sexual mores

Watch	Read
Midterm essay guidelines	Midterm essay prompt

14. Republican and Augustan Rome II: matrona and meretrix

**Note: these readings include descriptions of sexual assault.*

Watch	Read
a. Women in Roman political life	Livy, History of Rome – Sabine Women
b. Chastity and Precarity	Livy, History of Rome – Lucretia
c. Transformation in marriage	

15. Imperial Rome part I: power and “perversion”

Watch	Read
a. From republic to empire	
b. The sex life of the emperors	Suetonius, <i>Life of Caligula</i>
c. Masculinity and femininity in upheaval	

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Quiz 5	Friday 5/1 by 2 pm

Week VI (5/4–5/8)16. *Imperial Rome part II: The 90%*

Watch
a. Beyond the Elite
b. Anxiety and Mystery

17. *Marriage as a happy ending*

Watch	Read
a. The Hellenistic romance novel	Achilles Tatius, <i>Leucippe and Clitophon</i>
b. All you need is love?	Achilles Tatius, <i>Leucippe and Clitophon</i>
c. Freedom, virginity, salvation	Achilles Tatius, <i>Leucippe and Clitophon</i>

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Midterm essay	Wednesday 5/6 by 2 pm
Quiz 6	Friday 5/8 by 2 pm

Week VII (5/11–5/15)18. *Marriage and sexuality in the New Testament*

Watch	Read
a. Looking back and ahead	
b. The historical Jesus and the Gospels	
c. Paul: Marriage and <i>Porneia</i>	New Testament: 1 Corinthians 5-7, Romans 1

19. *Sexuality and “Heresy” in the 2nd century*

Watch	Read
a. Ideals of community and sexuality in later books of the New Testament	
b. The Gnostic challenge	
c. “Heresy” and “Orthodoxy”	Excerpts from Clement of Alexandria, <i>The Instructor</i>

20. *Celibacy as a happy ending: models of Chastity in the 3rd century*

Watch	Read
a. Celibacy and the new Hellenistic romance novel	
b. Paul and Thecla	<i>The Acts of Paul and Thecla</i>
c. The Acts of Thomas	

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Quiz 7	Friday 5/15 by 2 pm

Week VIII (5/18–5/22)21. *Jewish-Christian debates: celibacy and holiness*

Watch
a. Christians and Jews – continuity and separation
b. Syriac (Eastern Christian) models of holiness
c. Rabbinic sources on procreation and celibacy

22. *Rabbinic asceticism and the married monk*

Watch	Read
a. The rabbinic dilemma	
b. Can sexual desire be eliminated?	
c. The married monk	selected stories from the Babylonian Talmud

23. *Going to the desert: Saints struggling with sex*

Watch	Read
a. The monastic movement	
b. The monk and the world	Excerpts from <i>History of the Monks of Egypt</i> (Prologue)
c. Sexual struggles in hagiographies	Excerpts from <i>History of the Monks of Egypt</i> (John Lycopolis)

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Quiz 8	Friday 5/22 by 2 pm

Week IX (5/25–5/29)24. *Legislating sex in the Christian Roman Empire*

Watch
a. Christianization of the Roman empire
b. Marriage and divorce
c. Same-sex relations
d. Prostitution and the notion of “sin”

25. Chastity and Choice – the question of sexual coercion and free will

**Note: Discussion of rape and sexual assault.*

Watch	Read
a. Legal paradigms of coercion and guilt	
b. The problem of free will and sexual coercion	Excerpt from Ambrose, <i>On Virgins</i> III.7
c. From free will to sin and repentance	Augustine, <i>City of God</i> I.18-19

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Quiz 9	Friday 5/29 by 2 pm

Week X (6/1 – 6/5)

Watch	Read
Final essay guidelines	Final essay prompt

25. The “repentant prostitute” stories

Watch	Read
a. Justinian, Theodora, and Body Politic	
b. Early origins	
c. Desert Fathers save prostitutes	
d. From the brothel to the monastery	<i>Life of Pelagia</i>

26. The politics of sex and sin – a historical journey

Watch
a. Looking back
b. Two controversies of the fourth century
c. Looking ahead and contemporary resonance

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Quiz 10	Friday 6/5 by 2 pm

Submit/complete	Due date and time
Final essay	Wednesday 10/6 by 2 pm