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 poets 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, love 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 the whole of 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 a 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.