

ROMANTIC COMEDY

Expos 20: Spring 2024

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From ancient Greece to Netflix, the romantic comedy is one of the most popular and durable genres in Western art. Though sometimes considered frothy or inconsequential, romantic comedies often ask us to think deeply and subtly about sex, power, identity, and happiness. The best romantic comedies help us to see that the problem of love is inseparable from other profound questions about self and society: Who am I, really? Where do my desires come from? How do they relate to the social roles I'm asked to perform? What kind of society is needed for love?



In this course, we'll consider those questions—and strengthen your abilities as a thinker and writer—through some close encounters with literature, film, and criticism.



In **Unit 1**, we'll read Shakespeare's finest romantic comedy, [*Twelfth Night*](#). Shipwrecked on the coast of a strange country, the play's heroine, Viola, disguises herself as a young man and enters the service of Duke Orsino. Viola is in love with the duke, but the duke is in love with the wealthy Olivia—who, it turns out, is in love with the disguised Viola. A brilliant comedy of misunderstandings, *Twelfth Night* playfully investigates the fundamental questions about identity and desire.

We'll work through the play together, thinking about strategies for reading and annotation that can deepen your engagement with the text, and we'll watch a filmed version of a [historically-informed production](#) of *Twelfth Night* to better understand how Shakespeare is toying with conventions of the theater and gender. You'll then write a short argumentative essay (5–7 pages) that poses an analytical question about the play and answers that question through careful attention to the text.

In **Unit 2**, we'll move from Shakespeare to Hollywood and put an important theory about comedy in conversation with several classic rom-coms. In *The Anatomy of Criticism* and other works, literary critic Northrop Frye makes an influential argument about the relationship between comedy and society: “the movement of comedy,” Frye says, “is usually a movement from one kind of society to another.” However, Frye makes his argument primarily based on classical works and Shakespeare: does this theory help us to understand modern comedy too?

To answer this question, we'll read an excerpt from Frye's work and watch three films that laid the groundwork for generations of Hollywood rom-coms. In Howard Hawks's breakneck screwball comedy [Bringing Up Baby](#) (1938)—“one of the fastest, funniest films ever made,” according to one critic—a timid paleontologist (Cary Grant) tries to get a million-dollar donation



to support his research, but finds his plans ruined over and over by the eccentric young woman (Katharine Hepburn) who's fallen in love with him—and her pet leopard. Initially rejected by censors for its frank treatment of sex, Preston Sturges's witty and provocative [The Lady Eve](#) (1941) follows the hapless heir to a brewing fortune (Henry Fonda) who's more interested in snakes than women—that is, until he is seduced by a beautiful con woman (Barbara Stanwyck) and drawn into a complex and hilarious game of deception. Our final film, George Cukor's [Adam's Rib](#) (1948), features two lawyers, the more traditional Adam (Spencer

Tracy) and the feminist Amanda (Katharine Hepburn), representing opposite sides in the trial of a woman who shot her cheating husband, turning the case into a greater debate on the rights and wrongs of men and women.

You'll write an essay (6–8 pages) that tests Frye's theory on one of these films, making a persuasive argument about how the theory deepens our understanding of the film—or how the film complicates Frye's theory.

Finally, in **Unit 3**, you'll be able to choose a topic related to romantic comedy that you find interesting and explore it in a research essay. You'll have a wide latitude in what you write about here: a film (such as your favorite contemporary rom-com), a play (such as *Twelfth Night* or another of Shakespeare's romantic comedies), or another work of literary romantic comedy (such as a novel by Jane Austen). There are lots of possibilities.

After choosing your primary text, formulating a research question, conducting research, and taking in the scholarly conversation, you'll write a longer argumentative essay (8–10 pages) that contributes something to that conversation.

At the beginning of Unit 3, we'll watch a recent rom-com, [Crazy Rich Asians](#) (2018), and use it as a way to think about newer developments in romantic comedy and as an example for how you might think about the stages of your own research process, from formulating a research question to entering a critical debate. (You don't have to write your paper about *Crazy Rich Asians*, though you can if you want to.)



If you want to delve deeply into some fun and challenging works of literature and film and to grow as a writer and a thinker in the process, I'd love to have you in the course. Feel free to get in touch (ryan_napier@fas.harvard.edu) if you have any questions about the course or my approach to teaching.

