In this course we will read Plato’s dialogue on love or eros, the Symposium, and consider (i) a number of philosophical questions that emerge in it, and (ii) its influence on debates about the worth of women, the nature of desire, and the possibility of knowledge in Renaissance Italy. The Symposium is renowned for a number of reasons: the pleasure of reading it, the interest of the topic of eros, the inventiveness of the character portraits of the speakers, the exploration of sexuality through multiple lenses, the vivid representation of Platonic forms. We will begin by considering the historical context (what symposia were, what the sexual norms of Athens at the time would have been (so far as we can discern)) and establishing some of the themes of the dialogue. These include: establishing the object or aim of love, determining whether love is single or double, evaluating the moral benefits and pitfalls of erotic experience, considering the difference between men and women as sufferers and objects of erotic desire, and drawing parallels between erotic desire and satisfaction on the one hand, and the pursuit of knowledge and its achievement on the other. Then we will read through the dialogue, considering its structure, the emergence of the different themes and philosophical questions, and the relation of the Symposium to other Platonic dialogues (in particular, the Phaedrus). Finally, we will read two Renaissance dialogues on the theme of love: Pietro Bembo’s Gli Asolani (1505/1530) and Tullia d’Aragona’s Dialogue on the Infinity of Love (Venice, 1547). Our interest here will be in the interpretation of the notion of ‘Platonic love’ and its deployment for moral and epistemological purposes in the Renaissance, and the feminist uses Aragona makes of the Symposium.

Prerequisites: Students in this course should have taken at least one course in ancient philosophy; ideally, you will have taken PHIL 345, Plato.

Other readings will be made available on MyCourses.

Course Requirements: weekly discussion questions (10%); one presentation to the class (10%); a write-up of the presentation (30%); one term paper (50%). Discussion questions should be submitted no later than the Tuesday preceding class at 17:00 on MyCourses. The write-up and the term paper must be submitted in hard copy. Students are advised to save electronic versions of all their work. You are expected to have read the assigned material before each class (consult the syllabus for weekly readings).

Grading criteria: To do excellent work in this course, you need to be able to do more than reiterate the readings or what was said in class. An “A” indicates that you not only understand the material, but that you have also thought critically about it, grasping at least some of its subtleties and implications. A “B” reflects an above-average understanding of the material without any major errors; “B” work does not capture the complexity of the issues. A “C” suggests a struggle with the material that results in basic comprehension but is flawed by some significant misunderstandings or errors. A “D” indicates only a rudimentary comprehension of part of the material with most of the material being misunderstood. An “F” indicates no understanding either of the assignment or of the material.
Policy on extensions:
No extensions will be granted without an appropriate medical note. Late work will be penalized at the rate of a third of a grade per calendar day past the due date. For example, a paper that is evaluated as a B, if one day late, will be assigned a grade of B-; the same paper, if two days late, would receive a C+.

Required syllabus statements:
McGill University values academic integrity. All students must, therefore, understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.