

Visions of Eurydice in Céline Sciamma's film 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire'

'Portrait of a Lady on Fire' is a love story framed around looking. It shows us how it feels to look and be looked at, to fall in love and to have love fade into memory. The film tells a story that radically redefines the gaze. The key element, in my opinion, to the film's success is writer and director Céline Sciamma's use of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The myth both centres the story in the past and transforms the present.

The film is set in 18th century France and follows Marianne (Noémie Merlant), a painter, who is invited to an isolated aristocratic household in Brittany, to paint the portrait of Héloïse (Adèle Haenel). Héloïse is newly betrothed to a Milanese nobleman whom she has never met and she is unhappy with the prospect of her marriage. So, in way of rebellion, she is refusing to pose for her portrait, and managed to exhaust the first painter who tried. So, when Marianne is brought to Héloïse, she is introduced to her as a walking companion. Marianne must paint Héloïse in secret, using fleeting memories to patch together a portrait.

The two women slowly form a connection, and this connection blooms into love. Their love story mimics the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, which becomes an explicit metaphor for their relationship just over half-way through the film, when Héloïse, Marianne and the serving girl Sophie (Luàna Bajrami) read and discuss Ovid's version of Orpheus' journey to and from the underworld, and his failure to save Eurydice.

Sciamma has said that the idea of including this myth came to her late in her script-writing process¹ but when the thought came to her, it was "an epiphany"². She initially included it because she wanted a scene where the characters would have an intellectual debate with each other, but as the idea grew in her mind, it became the key to tying the two threads of the narrative together. The first thread being Marianne in the present, reflecting on her love affair with Héloïse, and the second thread being the past in which Héloïse and Marianne met, bonded and fell in love. In fact, the relationship of Héloïse and Marianne does not just mimic that of Orpheus and Eurydice, it reinvents it

I. Looking is Dangerous

In the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, to turn and look can be the same as to kill. In his 'Metamorphoses', Ovid writes "[Orpheus] turned, and at once [Eurydice] sank back into the dark...she died for the second time³." To put it simply, looking is dangerous. Sciamma says one of the reasons that she chose this myth was because "it is the myth of the male gaze, [and] how the male gaze kills⁴."

In 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire', the look or the gaze is first harnessed to tell the story. In the beginning, Marianne steals glances at Héloïse, trying to commit her features to memory so that she can complete the portrait in secret. Héloïse stares back at her, defiant. But their looks lack coordination, when Héloïse looks at Marianne, Marianne turns away. There is a sense that it is forbidden - in a way, it is. Héloïse has rejected being looked at by refusing to pose for the previous painter. She has rejected objectification, and when she finds out that Marianne has been painting her in secret all this time, she feels betrayed. "Is this how you see me?" she asks incredulously, hurt plain in her voice. So, here as in the myth, looking is equated with danger and gives possibilities of betrayal and violation. Marianne must learn to truly see Héloïse before she can capture her likeness in paint.

The 'Male Gaze' was a term first coined by film critic Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay 'Visual

¹ TIFF Talks. (2019, September 6). *PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE Cast and Crew Q&A | TIFF 2019* [Video]. YouTube.

² Sciamma, C. (2020). *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* [DVD]. The Criterion Collection.

³ Ovid, Raeburn, D. A., & Feeney, D. C. (2004). *Metamorphoses : A new verse translation*. London.

⁴ Sciamma, C. (2020). *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* [DVD]. The Criterion Collection.

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Her theory is that that viewers of media are assumed to be heterosexual men, and so a heterosexual, masculine perspective is imposed on female characters (this is also because the creators of media are mainly heterosexual men). Camera angles seem almost phallic in the way they fragment women's bodies, unnecessarily including sensuous close-ups of lips, thighs, breasts, etc. This creates an erotic atmosphere around female characters despite not being relevant to a scene. Mulvey writes "in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly⁵." This idea of the active/male and passive/female is not just seen in film but in all visual culture and literature. In Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus is active as he leads Eurydice out of the underworld, and he is active when he turns back to look at her. Eurydice remains passive and obedient. In Ovid's telling of the myth, she is not even angry that Orpheus turned - "what could she complain of, except that he'd loved her⁶?"

Sciamma also tackles the male gaze in art history by tying together the objectification of women in film, with objectification of women in art. This is done through the protagonist of Marianne being an 18th century painter. Sciamma gets to use film as her medium, but also explore ideas about how women are and have been captured in painted portraits.

It is pertinent that Sciamma uses the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a tool for reframing the gaze. This is because in the past, classical mythology has been used not as a tool for the liberation of women, but as a tool for their objectification. We have, for example, the classical statues of men and woman to compare. 'Crouching Aphrodite' shows the goddess Aphrodite, bathing herself. This could be portrayed as a fairly mundane task – bathing is after all a routine activity - but instead there is an implied male viewer. Aphrodite looks upwards, with a surprised expression, and uses her arms to protect her modesty, creating a sense of shame around female nudity. And yet, her arms do not obscure the viewer's gaze as her breasts are still visible, so her protective gesture does more to draw attention to her nakedness than to deter it. Compare this to 'Discobolus', another Greek sculpture, but this time of a man. The differences are stark. The man depicted is nude, yet no attention is drawn to his nudity, it is not questioned by the viewer or shamed, it is just accepted. He is in the dynamic pose of a discus thrower, showing the clear divide of the active/male, passive/female. The man is in motion, whilst Aphrodite, the woman is the static object of an active male gaze.



'Crouching Aphrodite' in the British Museum



'Discobolus' in the National Roman Museum

In the renaissance period and beyond, the male gaze remains omnipresent, especially in paintings depicting scenes from classical mythology. For these artists, antiquity represented an exotic, pagan existence, one exempted from the moral restrictions of their Christian society. In short, classical mythology became an opportunity and excuse to paint nude women. This can be seen in the copies of the now lost 1508 painting 'Leda and the Swan' by Leonardo Da Vinci. Leda is nude, her body twisted into an anatomically awkward contrapposto position, to show off all parts of her body. The Swan, a disguised Zeus, wraps his wing around her hips and thigh, emphasising the sinuous curve of her body.



Leda and the Swan, copy of Leonardo da Vinci's original, by Cesare da Sesto



The Judgement of Paris by Peter Paul Rubens

Leda's smile makes this a particularly insulting depiction – in this myth, Zeus rapes Leda. The artist has chosen to ignore the trauma and violence associated with this story. Instead he displays her idealised naked body to the viewer, sexualising and objectifying her.

Similarly, this can be seen in Peter Paul Ruben's 1636 painting 'The Judgement of Paris'. Rubens uses his classical setting as an opportunity to paint the nude female

⁵ Mulvey, L. (1975). *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Screen, 16(3), 6-18.

⁶ Ovid, Raeburn, D. & Feeney, D. (2004). *Metamorphoses : A new verse translation*. London.

through the goddesses Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera – this is an especially attractive moment of Greek mythology for male artists because the goddesses are showing themselves off to Paris in the hope of being proclaimed as the most beautiful. He even goes as far as to paint the women from three different angles, so that the female form can be enjoyed from multiple perspectives. We can see Athena straight on, Aphrodite from the side and Hera from behind.

Whilst all the artworks I have mentioned are undoubtedly masterpieces in terms of composition, style and execution, their implications cannot be ignored. As art critic John Berger puts it, in these artworks “women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any appetite of their own⁷”, and this appetite feeds the male gaze. With ‘Portrait of a Lady on Fire’, Sciamma wages a war against the male gaze, calling the film “a manifesto of the female gaze⁸,” and does so by subverting the traditions of how women are depicted in relation to classical mythology. She removes the heterosexual, male perspective by writing a story about lesbian love, thus removing notions of gender domination, then she breaks the imbalance between the active artist and the passive muse.

II. The Artist and the Muse

The film presents to us an artist-muse relationship. Marianne is the artist and Héloïse becomes her muse, again echoing the artist-muse relationship of Orpheus and Eurydice. Marianne takes on the role of Orpheus. She is highly skilled in painting, as Orpheus is highly skilled in music. From the start of the story she is portrayed as being active, confident, and assertive. She jumps into the sea without hesitation to retrieve her art equipment when it falls overboard; when she arrives at Héloïse’s household, she finds herself a meal, without asking for permission. Orpheus too is highly assertive in his request to Hades to bring back Eurydice from death. But more importantly, Marianne symbolises Orpheus because she will eventually have to make a choice, a choice as to whether to be with her lover or to let her live as a memory, just as Orpheus made a choice whether to turn and look at Eurydice, or whether to save her.

Héloïse’s story on the other hand, parallels Eurydice’s. She is being taken away against her will, to an unwanted marriage away from the woman that she truly loves, just as Eurydice is taken by death away from Orpheus. For Héloïse, marriage might as well be death. She frequently talks in disgust of her fate, refusing to believe that she will find any joy in marriage. When Marianne tries to convince her otherwise by telling her that Milan is a city of music, so she will enjoy it, Héloïse responds sharply with “you’re saying, now and then, I’ll be consoled”. In fact, the man who Héloïse is engaged with was first engaged to Héloïse’s sister, who killed herself to escape marriage. It is no wonder that Héloïse sees this marriage as a form of death.

There is an energy and an intensity to an artist-muse relationship that makes it all the more captivating to watch, but there is also an imbalance. This imbalance comes back to the ideas of passive versus active. The artist is active as he styles the passive muse in whatever way he envisions her. However, Sciamma refuses the idea that the artist is the one with the power. She has said that with the film she wanted “to get rid of the idea of the muse...the muse is a fetishized, silent woman who’s inspiring just because she’s beautiful.”⁹

Sciamma’s erasure of the muse is beautifully conveyed in the scene where Héloïse poses for Marianne. At this point of the film, Héloïse knows that Marianne is a painter and has agreed to sit for her portrait. This already gives Héloïse more equality, Marianne is no longer painting her secretly, and now Héloïse can begin to have a say in how she is portrayed. “Equality is a pleasant feeling” says Héloïse in the scene just preceding this, but equality can also be disconcerting for those that previously held the power. At first the camera shows Marianne, the frame is close-up, and she is comfortably at her easel. When we see Héloïse, we see her from Marianne’s perspective, posing for the painting in a wider shot. Marianne smugly lists Héloïse’s little habits that she has noticed from her position as the viewer: Héloïse rubs her chin when she is hurt, she bites her lips when she is embarrassed, and she doesn’t blink when she is annoyed. “Forgive me” says Marianne, “I’d hate to be in your place.” Héloïse corrects her: “we are in the same place, exactly the same place.” The camera slowly pans in on Héloïse, until it comes to the same close position that we saw Marianne in before. “If you look at me, who do I look at?” Héloïse

⁷ Berger, J. (1972). Ways of Seeing. BBC.

⁸ VanDerWerff, E. (2020). *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* director Céline Sciamma on her ravishing romantic masterpiece. Vox.

⁹ TIFF Talks. (2019). *PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE* Cast and Crew Q&A | TIFF 2019 [Video]. YouTube.

says, then to prove her point she lists Marianne's habits, "when you don't know what to say you touch your forehead. When you lose control, you raise your eyebrows. And when you're troubled, you breathe through your mouth". When the camera switches back to Marianne at her easel, the shot is wide, and it is framed from Héloïse's perspective.

Marianne is clearly taken aback by the idea that she is also being looked at. This revelation removes her comfort in being the artist, as she realises that the muse is not passive, Héloïse has been actively looking back at her this whole time. The shot lingers as Marianne fidgets in discomfort. As one review puts it "Héloïse reveals that the currents of observation flow in both directions...this is the first subversion of the Orpheus myth; Eurydice, too, can choose to look¹⁰."

III. The Poet's Choice

Orpheus and Eurydice are first explicitly mentioned just over halfway through the film. Marianne, Héloïse, and Sophie sit around a table and Héloïse reads aloud the chapter of Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' that recounts Orpheus persuading Hades to let him save Eurydice, and then Orpheus making the fatal decision to turn and look before she was safely back in the underworld. Marianne and Sophie sit enraptured by Héloïse's passionate narration. The tension of the story is palpable, will Orpheus convince the gods? Will Eurydice be saved?

Sophie is outraged by the story's end – "that's horrible, poor woman! Why did he turn? He was told not to but did, for no reason!" Here Sophie sees straight into the enigma of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth: why did Orpheus turn? He was warned not to, he had everything to lose by turning, and nothing to gain. And yet he did turn. Marianne's interpretation tries to reconcile this paradox. She says "he chooses the memory of her. That's why he turns, he doesn't make the lover's choice but the poet's." Héloïse adds her thoughts to this: "perhaps she was the one who said, turn around."

Sciamma is not the only one to make a feminist interpretation of this myth. The fact that it was a myth often discussed by feminists was one of the reasons she decided to include it¹¹. Poet Carol Ann Duffy wrote a collection of poetry called 'The World's Wife' where she wrote poems from the perspectives of different iconic women. She dedicates one to Eurydice¹²:

"Like it or not,
I must follow him back to our life –
Eurydice, Orpheus' wife –
to be trapped in his images, metaphors, similes,
octaves and sextets, quatrains, and couplets,
elegies, limericks, villanelles,
histories, myths...

[...]

I did everything in my power
to make him look back.
What did I have to do, I said,
to make him see we were through?
I was dead. Deceased.
I was Resting in Peace. Passé. Late.
Past my sell-by date...
I stretched out my hand
to touch him once
on the back of the neck.
Please let me stay."

Like Sciamma, Duffy uses the myth to explore ideas equating death with freedom, and female disgust at being forced to marry and play the role of the muse. Here Eurydice also gets Orpheus to turn around. She secures her fate on her own terms. However, the interpretations are not the same. Duffy's version has a satirical twist, dispelling any of the romantic notions the reader might have of the myth. Sciamma does not do this. The romance of myth is obviously important in Sciamma's telling of a love story. Unlike Duffy's Eurydice who tricks Orpheus into turning around, Sciamma creates the mutual agreement to let Eurydice return to the underworld through the poet's choice, giving Eurydice agency in Orpheus' decision to turn, by having Eurydice ask for it.

When Marianne and Héloïse must part ways, they, like Orpheus, make the poet's choice. For them, the poet's choice is more realistic; their relationship can be allowed to live on as a memory where it would

¹⁰ Morrow, N. (2020). *Eurydice looks back: a review of Portrait of a lady on Fire*, by Nicola Morrow. Star Revue

¹¹ Sciamma, C. (2020). *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* [DVD]. The Criterion Collection.

¹² Duffy, C. A. (2015). *The world's wife* (Vol. 6). Pan Macmillan.

not be allowed to continue in a world that is built against them. In their last few days together, they discuss what they will remember about each other. Marianne draws a small portrait of Héloïse so that she can keep a small image of her. At Héloïse's request she opens Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' and draws a self-portrait inside for Héloïse to keep. This drawing, done on page 28, the end of Orpheus' chapter, becomes a secret symbol of their relationship. When later in life Marianne comes across a portrait of Héloïse, she smiles to see that whilst Héloïse is depicted with a daughter, she is also holding a book, her thumb opening it on page 28. This is a symbol of all the queer women throughout history. We might not know their stories but that does not mean that they did not exist, just as to the unknowing viewer, this portrait is of just a mother and her daughter, but to Marianne it is a message of love and desire.

The re-enactment of the myth is brought to an end in their goodbye scene. Marianne goes to Héloïse's room where Héloïse is trying on her wedding dress. Struggling to keep her composure, Marianne hugs Héloïse in farewell, then leaves the room abruptly, trying not to look back. She runs down the stairs and makes it to the front door of the house. She opens the door, flooding the corridor with light and steps outside, but before she leaves, she hears Héloïse's voice behind her. "Turn around," Héloïse commands and Marianne turns; she sees a luminous Héloïse standing there, in her white wedding dress. A second later the door slams and Héloïse fades into the darkness.

The main body of the film focuses on Héloïse and Marianne's relationship as it unfolds, but this story is framed as being in the past. In fact, the film opens with Marianne seeing an old painting of Héloïse. This painting triggers memories of the past, and the audience is taken through the story of them meeting. We are shown that Marianne is haunted by her memories of Héloïse. In two separate scenes we see Marianne walking through the dark. Héloïse appears behind her in her glowing wedding dress, looking just as she did in their parting scene. Each time Marianne turns around, only to see Héloïse fade into darkness, just as Eurydice fell back into the abyss. Clearly, the poet's choice is not an easy option, memories can be sweet, but they can also be painful.



Héloïse in one of Marianne's visions



Marianne, standing in front of her painting of Orpheus and Eurydice.

After we see their farewell scene, we are taken back to Marianne's near-present. We see her in an exhibition, standing by her own painting, which depicts the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The allusions are clear: Eurydice wears a bright white dress, mirroring Héloïse's wedding dress, and Orpheus wears a blue robe, the same blue that Marianne wears as she stands in front of the painting. The cliffy background evokes the coastal setting of Brittany, where their love affair took place. A man walks by and compliments the painting, "usually [Orpheus] is portrayed before he turns or after, as Eurydice dies. Here, they seem to be saying goodbye." This line shows that Sciamma is aware that she is reinventing the myth, making it new. In an interview she said, "it's about reinventing and revisiting the myth, and from a feminine perspective¹³."

IV. Conclusion

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has been persistent in popular culture for millenia. We see it referred to in older paintings, classical music, and operas but now also in modern musicals, songs, and films¹⁴. In French culture, the myth has been particularly pervasive with Jean Cocteau's 'Orphic trilogy'

¹³ TIFF Talks. (2019). *PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE Cast and Crew Q&A | TIFF 2019* [Video]. YouTube.

¹⁴ An example of a musical based on Orpheus and Eurydice is *Hadestown*, and in modern music we have for example Arcade fire's album 'Reflektor' which has two songs dedicated to Orpheus and Eurydice, and was inspired by Marcel Camus' 1959 film interpretation of the myth, 'Black Orpheus'.

and Maurice Blanchot's essay 'The Gaze of Orpheus'. Céline Sciamma's 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire', should rightfully take its place among these iconic and influential interpretations.

The classics have become a haven for queer and feminist stories; Luca Guadagnino's 2017 film 'Call Me by Your Name' uses a discussion about Greek and Roman male statues to symbolise a homosexual awakening; Ali Smith's 2007 novel 'Girl meets Boy' uses stories from Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' to explore gender-fluidity. These examples are just two out of a growing genre of counter-cultural expression that plays on classical heritage. "Key to the work of changing the world is changing the story¹⁵" says feminist writer Rebecca Solnit. Classicist Helen Morales adds to this, writing "myths are read selectively, re-created, adapted, cut and pasted, and they always have been, especially in antiquity. The different versions of the myths operated collectively as a kind of conversation, later versions responding to earlier, like contributions to a long-running debate...looking at myths with a 'queer eye' unlocks levels that would otherwise remain hidden¹⁶". 'Portrait of a Lady on Fire', with its setting that evokes Sappho's utopic Lesbos, a female-centric environment where lesbian love can be explored without consequence, and its exploration of Orpheus and Eurydice as a mutual, feminist tale, fits perfectly into this genre of classical subversion.

Sciamma's subversion lies in her vision of an empowered Eurydice through Héloïse. In Sciamma's version, Eurydice has agency, she takes control of her fate and refuses to be passive. Any preconceived ideas of a muse are eroded, Héloïse is an artistic collaborator, not an object, just as Eurydice becomes an active part of Orpheus' story, through Marianne, Héloïse, and Sophie's commentary on the myth. Sciamma confronts the male gaze that permeates through classical reception, creating a story that focuses on the female, queer gaze using mythology as a tool for showing new perspectives.

¹⁵ Solnit, R. (2018). *Call Them by Their True Names: American Crises (and Essays)*. Haymarket Books.

¹⁶ Morales, H. (2020). *Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths*. Wildfire.

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