"Not the Lover's Choice, but the Poet's": Classical Receptions in Portrait of a Lady on Fire

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Portrait de la jeune fille en feu, dir. Céline Sciamma, 2019

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Céline Sciamma's film Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu, 2019) tells its 18th-century story of love and loss in part by retelling an ancient story, the myth of the poet Orpheus and his beloved Eurydice, as related by the Roman poet Ovid in his epic Metamorphoses (c. 8 CE). The myth's most iconic moment, when Orpheus turns around to look at Eurydice and therefore loses her to Hades, occupies a central position in the film's plot and underlies its running theme of 'looking at' as 'looking back.' By changing certain aspects of the myth – replacing poetry or singing with painting, making both main characters women, and having them alternate between the two main mythic roles – Portrait does not so much update the ancient story as debate its meanings. What does it mean to lose someone beloved but gain their image? How is every loss a kind of death, and in its train, the life that remains a kind of afterlife? Most generally, what are the links among lived experience, memory, and art? By raising these questions via the ancient myth, Portrait meditates on the effect of making, as Orpheus did, "not the lover's choice, but the poet's."

Keywords: Orpheus, Eurydice, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, film, reception, Céline Sciamma

Dans son film Portrait de la jeune fille en feu (2019), Céline Sciamma raconte une histoire d'amour et de séparation au XVIIIe siècle en reprenant en partie un récit antique, le mythe du poète Orphée et de sa bien-aimée Eurydice, tel que raconté par le poète romain Ovide dans ses Métamorphoses (v. 8 ap. J.-C.). Le moment le plus emblématique du mythe, lorsqu'Orphée se retourne pour regarder Eurydice et la perd donc au profit de l'Hadès, occupe une place centrale dans l'intrigue du film et sous-tend un thème récurrent : « regarder » [looking at] ou « regarder en arrière » [looking back]. En modifiant certains aspects du mythe – la peinture remplace la poésie ou le chant, les personnages principaux sont des femmes, qui jouent alternativement les deux principaux rôles mythiques –, Portrait n'actualise pas tant le récit antique que le débat sur ses significations. Que cela signifie-t-il de perdre un être cher mais de gagner son image ? En quoi chaque séparation est-elle une sorte de mort, et dans son sillage, la vie qui reste une sorte de vie après la mort ? Plus généralement, quels sont les liens entre l'expérience vécue, la mémoire et l'art ? En soulevant ces questions par le biais du mythe, Portrait médite sur les conséquences de faire, comme Orphée, « non pas le choix de l'amant, mais celui du poète ». Cet article a fait l'objet d'une traduction en français sur le carnet Antiquipop : https://antiquipop.hypotheses.org/8793

Mots-clés : Orphée, Eurydice, Ovide, Métamorphoses, film, réception, Céline Sciamma

A painting shows a night sky half-obscured by angling clouds. Slightly left of center and halfway to the upper edge, a small full moon streaks the clouds with white. In balanced composition, slightly *right* of center and mostly *below* the horizon line stands a figure: small against the dramatic sky and empty, grassy sward, she is the obvious subject, but who is she? What is she doing there? And in the most striking detail, emphatically unremarked on in the scene, why is the hem of her dress on fire? For from the bottom corner of the dress,

which is a darkened grassy green, a jagged yellow flare rises up, like a small bolt of lightning, shedding a little additional light that casts the woman's shadow towards the moon. Just as this painted "Portrait" shades, at its edges, into darkness, so does the film that contains it, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, likewise begin in mystery.

We get to see only once, and briefly, this painting which, in the manner of *mise en abyme*, shares the film's title, "Portrait of a Lady on Fire" (in the French, "Portrait de la jeune fille en feu," some of whose depths I sound in the conclusion, below).[1] It is shown only in the opening scene, at the back of a shot and at first rather small in the *mise en scène*, after an art student has admitted to her teacher, the painter, that she has brought the canvas out of storage. It is for some reason forbidden; as hinted at by having been hidden away, it is of some mysterious meaning to the painter, too painful to keep in view, too significant to destroy. We sense all this from *looking at* her: already sitting still for her students to paint *her* portrait, she grows suddenly tense, her stiffer physical posture suggesting a deeper emotional discompose. Flicking her eyes to a point off screen, she abruptly interrupts her series of clear instructions to ask, now uncertain, "Who brought that painting out?"

Like the other characters in this scene, we cannot help but look: we *look at* the painter as she *looks at*. This ironic or recursive gesture, a general characteristic of narrative film, has special meaning in *Portrait*. Here in the opening scene it is programmatic: when the shot cuts to show the painting, we see from the painter's point of view and are invited to share her feeling. The painting is nearly centered, framed by two students who – following the painter's gaze and modeling looking for us – look back at it with heads turned and faces therefore hidden, figures blurring as the camera rack-focuses on the canvas; although real and present, the girls are proxies, visibly less important than the painting's absent subject. A slow, even zoom lasts about half the shot (10 of 20 seconds), suggesting attention growing more focused and emotion increasing with it. This present moment is charged by contrast with an as-yet unknown past, as the painter says that what's depicted is from "a long time ago" (*il y a longtemps*).

In this way, *looking at* becomes becomes a freighted *looking back*. Indeed, the subject is not merely past but – mysteriously – lost. When a student asks for the painting's title, the shot cuts back to the painter: she is clearly holding her pose, not moving, as a way of holding herself together in the midst of being – visibly – deeply moved. In answer, she breathes out the words as if she has never spoken them aloud before and can hardly bear to do so even now: "Portrait de la jeune fille en feu." In line with that metaleptic signal of *mise en abyme*, we viewers, who have already been falling into her feeling, finally get to breathe out, too. The effect is a kind of visual-instinctual or mirror-neuronal sympathy, with a story of loss, with elegy, framed as mystery – albeit an unusual one, since we don't yet know *what* has been done, exactly, and *to whom*. Who is the 'lady' in the painting, and how – whether literally or figuratively – has she been lost?

Naturally the painter knows, and so the mystery of the painted "Portrait" is not to be 'solved' so much as recalled, realized in a flashback that – after a jump cut into the next scene – occupies the rest of the story. Thus the filmed *Portait* comprises a long 'looking back' into the painter's memory, which furthers the recursion by centering in turn on certain meaningful moments of 'looking at.' The result is a beautiful meditation on how the present ('at') becomes the past ('back'): how lived experience *may* be turned into images, although that risks replacing a dynamic living person with static pictures that degrade in replication; but ultimately *must* become memory alone. Indeed, with the story set mostly in remembered past, any 'looking *at*' is always a 'looking *back*': the action is meaningful and the feelings real, but the subject is absent, inaccessible to present experience and, so, effectively lost, even imaginary. In this way, *Portrait*'s opening scene establishes a programmatic link between memory as a device for ekphrastic storytelling and a pervasive feeling of elegy.

If that combination, of memory and elegy, is also a fairly general feature of narrative film, it takes on special meaning in *Portrait*'s story and, for my purposes most importantly, in context of the film's explicit engagement with an ancient myth: Orpheus' doomed attempt to save his beloved Eurydice from Hades/death, as told by the Roman poet Ovid in his epic, the *Metamorphoses* (10.1-77).[2] The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is the archetype for *Portrait*'s depiction of lived experience as leading inevitably to memory of lost love.[3] With a dramatic reading of Ovid at its center, the film's recurrent gesture of 'looking at' as 'looking back' becomes a version – etymologically, a re-'turn' – of the myth's most iconic action, when Orpheus turns his lover's

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1   Distributor's website for the film: https://mk2films.com/en/film/portrait-of-a-lady-on-fire/; all of the paintings and sketches in the film are by Hélène Delmaire.

2   Ovid's tale continues past Eurydice's death: most of Met. book 10 comprises stories Orpheus sings in his grief for her, while his own story is concluded by the poem's narrator at 11.1-66. On the myth, see, e.g., Segal 1989, and on its receptions, e.g., Friedman 1970, Warden 1982, Bernstock 1991, Babbi 1999, and Vieillefon 2003. On receptions of Ovid more generally, e.g., Miller and Newlands 2014. For possible Ovidian receptions in others of Sciamma's films, see below, n. 22.

3   The myth has been adapted for the screen many times: e.g., Jean Cocteau's 1950 *Orphée* (see Winkler 2009, p. 281-294), Marcel Camus's 1959 *Orfeu Negro* (see Fredericksmeyer 2007), Baz Luhrmann's 2001 *Moulin Rouge* (see Cyrino 2008). One of the stories sung by Ovid's Orpheus, that of Pygmalion, has recurred in film from near the beginning, with Georges Méliès's 1898 *Pygmalion et Galatée* followed by versions as varied as George Cukor's 1964 musical *My Fair Lady*, Luc Besson's 1990 thriller *Nikita*, and Alex Garland's 2014 science-fictional *Ex Machina* (see Hammond 2018); on this veritable 'Pygmalion complex' (Païni 2010, p. 335, per

gaze back at Eurydice, who is therefore lost to death… but in a way, gained for art. From this perspective, *Portrait*'s opening scene is already a re-enactment of that archetypal loss: 'looking at' the painted "Portrait," the painter remembers that she long ago 'looked back' at her beloved and therefore lost her, retaining only art. As she herself puts it, like ancient Orpheus she made "not the lover's choice, but the poet's."

To develop that reading in this essay, I first summarize major parallels between film and myth and point to some important differences. I then discuss the most overtly classical-receptional scene, when a version of Ovid's tale is read aloud among a trio of characters who debate the myth's most famous action. With their different interpretations in mind, I explore other moments of classical (Ovidian) reception in the film, including the appearance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in hardcopy on screen, an unusual painting of "Orpheus and Eurydice," and the most crucial moment of 'turning around.' All of that leads to the film's own most iconic scene, which provides the subject-matter for the painting and therefore motivates the story, the "lady on fire." I hope that this essay invites readers to share in *Portrait*'s classical receptions, whether for the first time or – per the story – looking again[4].

Major parallels and differences between *Portrait* and the myth

I distinguish among the most recurrent points of reference as follows: Sciamma's film (*Portrait*, in italics), the titular painting within the film ("Portrait," in quotation marks), the ancient myth as if in the abstract ('the myth') and its concrete telling ('tale') in Ovid's poem (*Metamorphoses*, henceforth *Met.*), and any given work's 'story' or, in narratological terms, *fabula* as opposed to its 'plot' or *syuzhet*. In those terms, the major parallel between film and myth is a shared basic story despite differences between plots. In the next section, it will also be necessary to refer to the version of Ovid's poem read aloud in the film ('the French translation') as distinct from the ancient Latin text ('the Latin'). Such is the complexity of reception studies – and, as I hope to suggest, a part of *Portrait*'s power as a work of art. A few other works and sources are referred to *ad hoc*.

The most obvious parallel has already been noted: the shared basic story or *fabula*, in which an artist/lover (Marianne [Noémie Merlant], Orpheus) hopes to save their beloved (Héloïse [Adèle Haenel], Eurydice), and thus their love-relationship, from a kind of 'death,' whether figurative (Héloïse is arranged to be married to a Milanese gentleman, such that no future with Marianne is possible) or literal (Eurydice is subject to Hades, i.e., has died already and is returning to life on borrowed time). Famously, the artist/lover fails, 'looking back' and – in different ways – therefore losing their beloved: Marianne looks back and sees Héloïse once more, in the dress for her arranged marriage to the gentleman, an image that will haunt her, such that evidently she has had no lover since; Orpheus looks back to see his fellow newlywed Eurydice, thereby violating the terms of his arrangement with Hades, and so she dies a second time, becoming a 'ghost' whose memory prevents Orpheus from accepting offers of new love (Ovid *Met.* 10.50-81).[5] Finally, both artists, bereft of love, make new art: Marianne goes on to paint, tellingly, an "Orpheus and Eurydice" as well as the titular "Portrait"; and Orpheus sings tales of 'forbidden love.'

Schematizing the major parallel thus already reveals some meaningful differences. First in art: *Portrait*'s Orpheus-figure, Marianne, is a painter, whereas mythic Orpheus was a poet and singer. Although Marianne has some knowledge of music and can play harpsichord/pianoforte a little, that difference is a first indication of how *Portrait* develops and intensifies the visuality of the theme of 'looking at' and 'back': Orpheus might well have *not* looked at Eurydice; Marianne, tasked with painting a portrait, *must* look at Héloïse. That emphasis on visuality is also appropriate – we should be careful not to say 'natural' – to *Portrait* given the medium of film as well as the recurrent trope in the artform, noted above, of 'looking at' characters who are themselves 'looking at.' Thus *Portrait*'s cinematographer, Claire Mathon, aimed at a lensing that would offer a 21st century analogue to painting in the late 18th century.[6]

This difference, between visual/painterly film and aural/singerly myth, is furthered in *Portrait*'s unusual and striking approach to music: there is no extra-diegetic music in the film, and diegetic music occurs in only three scenes. Each musical scene emphasizes the relationship between the two main characters: an early

moment of earnest discovery between them; the crucial moment that inspires the painted "Portrait"; and the final scene, in which the film's main Orpheus takes – and through her, we take – a long, emotional final look at her Eurydice.

If those are differences between the two 'Orpheuses,' there are also differences between the Eurydice-figures. Although Héloïse is perhaps like mythic Eurydice in the negative sense of having no particular artistic gift, she is unlike Eurydice in having a voice in the plot. Indeed, it is Héloïse who gives voice to the transformative idea that mythic Eurydice might have played a larger role than spelled out in Ovid's tale – an idea that goes on to structure *Portrait*'s version of the iconic action.

That scene points again to the difference between the myth's literal deaths and fantastic elements, and the film's figurative 'death' in the different kind of 'fantasy' that is memory. And of course, with consequences for the story, unlike in the ancient myth, both figures are women.

"Why did he turn?": a philosophical dialogue about Orpheus 'looking back'

Portrait makes its engagement with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice overt about halfway through, after Marianne and Héloïse have started to have feelings for each other and just before the 'lady on fire' scene. Héloïse's mother is away, and in her absence the three remaining women have warmly bonded despite their differences in status, especially from the shared experience of helping Sophie (Luàna Bajrami) deal with an unwanted pregnancy. The theme of a common bond among women runs through the film, whose ramifications therefore continue into the next scene.

In the present scene, it is night, and the three are sitting at a table in the kitchen. By firelight from the hearth, Héloïse reads aloud from a French translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, starting just before Orpheus' speech asking Hades and Persephone to release Eurydice and ending with Eurydice's second, final death after Orpheus 'looks back.' The reading is interrupted a few times as the women react to the story and debate its meaning; and Héloïse reads two parts aloud again, centered on the iconic moment and its consequence: first when Orpheus turns, and then when Eurydice says 'farewell' and fall into the abyss.

Portrait thus places special emphasis on the myth's iconic moment while questioning its meaning in ways that speak to the developing feelings between Marianne and Héloïse. This complex reception is dramatized by the editing, as the shot cuts several times among the three women individually in medium close-up (upper body and head, some background). The effect is energizing and intimate, as if we are at the table with them and thus – albeit silent – a part of the conversation. Indeed, non-verbal cues, including 'looks,' are particularly meaningful here.

In the following table (table 1), I outline the scene (1:07:45 – 1:11:06) with, on the left, the reading of Ovid, in the center, the characters represented and their dialogues, on the right, the out-of-frame dialogues, and some indications about the scene [dialogue per English subtitles].

Table 1. Outline of Ovid's Metamorphoses read aloud in Portrait

Reading (all by Héloïse)	Pictured	Off-screen dialogue
"Then, striking the lyre … robbed her of her youth"	Book; Héloïse torso, face panned up to	
"I beseech you … All will be yours"	Sophie	
"We all end up here … human race"	Marianne (first sipping wine, then smiling at book)	
"After living out … she will be yours"	Héloïse (reading)	
"If the fates refuse … both our deaths"	Sophie (first looking at Héloïse, then implicitly at Marianne)	
	Sophie: "He's convincing"	Héloïse: "Very"
	Sophie: "I hope they say yes"	
	Héloïse (drinking then resuming)	

"Then for the first time … resist his prayer"	Héloïse (reading)	
"They sent for Eurydice … on condition"	Marianne (smiling more obviously at Héloïse, then at Sophie at "from her wound")	
"… that he would not look back… void"	Sophie (drinking wine)	
"In deep silence… threshold, when…"	Héloïse (reading)	
"fearing losing… empty air"	Sophie (visibly reacting to the iconic moment)	
"Dying a second time… loving her"	Héloïse (reading)	
	Sophie: "That's horrible. Poor woman. Why did he turn? He was told not to, but did for no reason"	
	Marianne (to Sophie): "There are reasons"	
	Marianne (turning to Héloïse): "Read it again"	Sophie: "You think so?"
"They were nearing… spouse turned"	Héloïse (reading)	
	Héloïse (looking wide-eyed at Sophie)	Sophie: "No, he can't look at her for fear of losing her"
	Sophie: "That's no reason. He was told not to do that"	
	Héloïse: "He's madly in love. He can't resist"	
	Héloïse (turning to look at Marianne)	Marianne: "I think Sophie has a point"
	Marianne: "He could resist. His reasons aren't serious. [To Sophie] Perhaps he makes a choice"	
	Sophie: "What choice?"	
	Marianne: "He chooses the memory of her. That's why he turns. [turning to Héloïse] He doesn't make the lover's choice, but the poet's"	
(considering) "She spoke a last farewell … abyss"	Héloïse (first reading, then, after considering): "Perhaps she was the one who said [turning to Marianne] Turn around"	
	Marianne (opening mouth to speak, says nothing)	

Although the three women are all sitting at the same table, once the scene begins they are only shown separately: no two women are on screen at the same time. As the shot cuts to each several times in turn, emphasis falls on their individual perspectives even on shared experiences and feelings. Thus this scene of reading aloud and debating an ancient story takes the form of a philosophical dialogue: Sophie's name, after

all, means 'wisdom,' and the three have bonded partly around her search for *practical* wisdom about her pregnancy.[7] Indeed, with its emphasis on wine-drinking, the scene might recall a particular philosophical dialogue, Plato's *Symposium* or 'Drinking-Party.' In both cases, the topic is 'love,' and the *Symposium* makes reference to homosexual *eros*, including – unusually for ancient literature – between women.[8]

But in important ways the dialogue in *Portrait*'s myth-reading scene is not Platonic, and not only in the loose sense of representing an erotic relationship between two of the speakers.[9] More importantly, in a way simply absent from surviving ancient literature, the interlocutors are of course all women. The scene is thus a microcosm of the film: although men play structurally significant roles in the story, they are mostly small and distant in the plot. Only a few men appear on screen, even the structurally significant men are removed in age (Marianne's father, Héloïse's intended husband), and all go unnamed. Only two men have speaking parts: first the man who ferries Marianne to and from Brittany, giving a terse instruction where to go; second a man at the gallery show who praises her painting of Orpheus and Eurydice (discussed below).

From this perspective, the scene – and thus perhaps the whole film, which not incidentally begins with dialogue between teacher and students, likewise all women – could be called rather a 'Diotimic' dialogue, after the woman philosopher to whom Plato has his character Socrates attribute the philosophical high point of the *Symposium*: the mystical ascent or 'ladder of love,' from sexual *eros* through non-sexual *philia* to divine *agape* (210a-212b). In a sort of structural parallel, the film's Diotimic focus continues into the next scene, when the three women join some dozens of others around a beachside bonfire – and simultaneously, music fills the air and Héloïse's dress catches fire, inspiring the eponymous painting and motivating the whole film. In this way *Portrait*'s high point, really the central turning-point and focus of the story, follows directly on, and must be informed by, the women's reading of Ovid's tale of Orpheus and Eurydice.[10]

UNDERSTANDING OVID'S TALE AS MYTHIC MIRROR-IMAGE OF *PORTRAIT*

So, how do they understand the tale? First, Sophie feels that Orpheus is "convincing" (Héloïse agrees: "very") and she therefore "hopes" that Hades and Persephone grant his wish. But she is then – the more so – confounded when he does what "he was told not" to do, as she sees it "for no reason". In context of dealing with an unwanted pregnancy, perhaps there is a personal feeling here, a projected disgust with yet another man's unreasoning desire? Or, in her role as household servant, a question about the difficulty of disobedience?

"However that may be, partly Marianne agrees, "think[ing] Sophie has a point": in her view, Orpheus could have chosen otherwise, but – at least in her first interpretation – he made his choice for reasons that "aren't serious". Sophie and Marianne do not resolve their disagreement about the premise: for Sophie, Orpheus had "no reason" (iterated); by contrast, Marianne suggests that "[t]here are reasons." But with the same premise in mind, Marianne yet comes to a different conclusion in dialogue with Héloïse."

In Héloïse's mind, Orpheus violated the condition for a reason that is, strictly, not 'reason' but rather emotion: he "couldn't resist" because he was "madly in love." If we must be uncertain whether Sophie has projected personal experience into her understanding of the tale, in Héloïse's case, and Marianne's to follow, it is clear. Héloïse clearly wants to believe in the overriding power of *love*. In response, Marianne, digging deeper than her own previous interpretation, links Orpheus' decision to *art*: as she puts it, "[h]e doesn't make the lover's choice, but the poet's." The line is one of two most central to the film, and this moment is the most important in the dialogue: Ovid's tale of Orpheus and Eurydice is interpreted by Marianne and Héloïse, albeit implicitly, as bearing on their own developing feelings. Here they come close to stating the equation we have identified as key to *Portrait*'s classical receptions: the artist Marianne is Orpheus, and Héloïse, her subject, is Eurydice.

And yet *Portrait* goes further in transforming the myth. In line with how both the Orpheus- and the Eurydice-figures are women – and perhaps as if taking a next step up the dialogue's 'Diotimic' ladder – it is

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7   Given her unwanted pregnancy, does Sophie's name echo Alan Pakula's 1982 film *Sophie's Choice?* Might that aspect of her story recall Plato's image of philosophy as midwifery (*Theaetetus* 148e-151d)?

8   The relevant passage, Aristophanes' speech on 'the origin of love' (*Symp.* 189c-193e), is the inspiration to another film centered on queer experience that also makes strategic use of music: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (dir. John Cameron Mitchell 2001), whose point of origin is the song called "The Origin of Love"; see Peraino (2005:246-252), Sypniewski 2009, Jenkins (2015:38-46).

9   There are some romances in Plato but they are mostly relegated to backgrounds. Significantly, as noted in the text even the *Symposium*, centered on eros, leads to an argument in favor of non-sexual love, an irony reflected in Alcibiades' complaint that he has long been unable to seduce Socrates (217a-219d).

10   Given a focus on women's society including eros, *Portrait* could be – and in some reviews has been– called 'sapphic,' but the sense is loosely modern: although, as *Frontière·s*'s anonymous reviewer suggests, we might compare the remote island setting to ancient Lesbos, there is no mention of Sappho or her poetry.

Héloïse who names another possibility: "What if it was Eurydice who told him to turn around?" ("Et si c'était Eurydice qui lui avait demandé de se retourner?"). Héloïse thus voices the possibility of Eurydice *having* a voice, a say in her own story. Ironically and beautifully, this possibility pauses our Orpheus' singing: Marianne is visibly floored, and in response she opens her mouth to speak… and, half-smiling, says nothing. That silence will be filled first in the plot by the 'lady on fire' scene, discussed further below. It is also made up for in a different way later, with further attention to the myth not in the abstract but in the concrete form of the book, to whose visible, physical presence on screen we now turn.

Filling in the blanks of Ovid's text: a reversed Eurydicean look at *Portrait*'s Orpheus

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* appears in *Portrait* in hardcopy: although we do not know it at first, it is the book Marianne has brought with her and loans to Héloïse. Later in the film we see parts of two pages; visual comparison identifies them as being from Banier's prose translation of 1732. I discuss some implications of the passage slightly further below. I have not been able to identify which edition of Banier's translation is shown in the film. Since, however, the translation was first published in 1732 and appeared in further editions throughout the 18th (and 19th) century, it is a historically plausible translation in *Portrait*'s setting in late 18th century France.[11] Interestingly, the Ovid read aloud by Héloïse is *not* Banier's translation but may be an abridgement of an 1881 translation by Puget, Guiard, Chevriau, and Fouquier (Firmin-Didot). I assume this substitution was for convenience and effect: Banier's translation gives Orpheus' speech in full, whereas the scene required a shorter text with different rhetorical emphases to fit the intended structure of shots and interpretations.

More importantly, the book itself, the physical object, goes on to play a much larger role than merely conveying the myth. It provides a space in which Marianne can make up for her concluding silence in the dialogue in a way consistent with her role as painterly 'Orpheus' – and which echoes some aspects of a different tale that Ovid puts in the mouth of ancient Orpheus. To see how, let us consider the text of Banier's Ovid pictured on-screen. The *verso* is somewhat out-of-focus text, certain words legible (esp. the name "Adonis" several times along the right-hand margin), the title "[METAMO]RPHOSES" partly legible at top. The *recto* shows in-focus text making clear this is "D'OVIDE LIV[RE]. X.", i.e., the ending of Ovid's *Met.* book 10, in this edition page 28. The text reads "quelqu'éclat ; en moins d'une heure, il en sortit une Fleur rouge qui ressembloit à celle de la Grenade. Cette Fleur dure peu de tems, puisque les mêmes vents qui la font éclorre, la font aussi tomber." That is Banier's rendering of *Met.* 10.733-739:

> intumuit sic, ut fulvo perlucida caeno
> surgere bulla solet, nec plena longior hora
> facta mora est, cum flos de sanguine concolor ortus,   735
> qualem, quæ lento celant sub cortice granum,
> punica ferre solent ; brevis est tamen usus in illo;
> namque male haerentem et nimia levitate caducum
> excutiunt idem, qui praestant nomina, venti.

Or in my English: "…a thunderclap… in less than an hour, there came from it a red flower that resembles that of the Pomegranate. This Flower lasts a short time, since the same winds that make it bloom, also make it fall." This is the end of Ovid's tale of Venus and her doomed lover, Adonis (*Met.* 10.503-559 and 708-738; 560-707 is Venus telling the story of Atalanta and Meleager). Not incidentally, it is also the final song Orpheus sings about forbidden love (10.152-154). Thematic resonance with *Portrait* is fairly clear, as is the *pathos* of the final sentence: like the "Flower [that] lasts a short time" (Banier: "Cette Fleur dure peu de tems"; Ovid: *flos … brevis est … usus in illo*, 735 and 737), the love that blooms between Marianne and Héloïse is constrained by time. That constraint is not yet final at this point in the film's flashback narrative, but it is known already – ironically – from the frame-story.

Both that ironic present feeling of inevitable future loss, and its relationship to memory and/as art, are deepened by what happens to the book in this scene. The two women are naked in Marianne's room: it is the 'morning after' they have slept together. Marianne has just been drawing for herself a small cameo of Héloïse, who observes that eventually Marianne will remember only the image and not her, a kind of 'metamorphosis' from, again, dynamic person into decaying static picture and fading memory. And yet in the midst of that

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11   WorldCat lists 22 editions of Banier's translation between 1732 and 1864, with an additional 29 between 1732 and 1771 also including the Latin.

proleptic elegy *Portrait*'s Eurydice surprises her Orpheus once more – Marianne's face echoes the change of expression from the end of the myth-reading scene – by asking for a portrait of her, too. The possibility of that emotionally charged role-reversal has been articulated in another scene: after Héloïse has agreed to sit for a formal portrait, she remarks that, when Marianne is looking at her, she naturally is looking at Marianne: subject and painter "are in the same place" ("Nous sommes à la même place") and so play the same roles.[12]

In the current scene, such mirror-imaging is made literal: breaking out her pencils, Marianne studies her own face in a round mirror placed over Héloïse's *mons pubis* and draws a self-portrait. Her canvas is the blank space of the Ovid *recto*, the bottom three-quarters of page 28. By reversing her image in the mirror, Marianne draws herself as Héloïse sees her, desired and beloved. In this way, *Portrait*'s Orpheus becomes a kind of Eurydice figure, too, a subject of 'looking at' and 'looking *back*': just as if, per Héloïse's suggestion at the end of the reading scene, it was indeed Eurydice who told Orpheus to 'turn around.' Since the plot is flashback, Marianne's Eurydicean status here, in the past, must inform her experience of sitting as portrait subject for her students in the opening (present-time) scene. First-time viewers learn that only now, but for Marianne any portrait-sitting must echo this moment of emotionally charged self-portraiture.

Considering still the now-illuminated book, we may also say that Marianne's self-portrait represents a kind of visual-artistic continuation of Ovid's poetic version of Orpheus' singing: a painterly Orpheus takes over where her mythic predecessor stopped. In fact, Ovid's tale of Orpheus continues into the poem's next book (11.1-66), as the archetypal poet sings of his own emotional state and experience of loss – a figurative self-reflection, even self-obsession, that is transformed in *Portrait*'s reflective dialogues and literal mirror-imagery. Although it is absent from the diegesis, that original, textual continuation of the tale nonetheless establishes a sort of negative or phantom context for Marianne's self-portrait and for where the story goes in the rest of the film.

To see how, we will first follow the now-illuminated hardcopy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to its final appearance on screen, in the film's penultimate scene, where – in line with film's and poem's metamorphic themes – the book has been artistically transformed. Not incidentally, that same scene will feature a different meaningful depiction of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. That complexly haunted moment will point us backwards through a series of other hauntings and have us look – at last – at the story's turning-point, the 'lady on fire' scene.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice on screen once more

Marianne's self-portrait has reminded us that emotional recollection is first activated in the film's opening scene, when she sees, unbidden, her painted "Portrait" of Héloïse. Thereafter the recurrence – even the 'eternal return' – of emotionally charged memory is emphasized in two ways that relate to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Both frame the lived experience of memory, like the sight of the "Portrait," as a startling return (as in Banier's translation of the Adonis story, "quelqu' éclat"). In context of the ancient myth's underworldliness, memory becomes a kind of haunting, and the remembered person, a *revenant* or ghost.

Although at certain striking points, discussed below, *Portrait* develops the idea of 'haunting' with a visual device that is also employed in horror, in general its approach to 'ghosts of the past' is heartbreaking rather than horrifying *per se*. Following the illustrated hardcopy of Ovid's text, we see this culminate in the film's penultimate scene, which forms a kind of pendant for the programmatic opening. At the gallery show, Marianne is visibly surprised by something in the catalogue; we follow her – the camera makes us Eurydice to her Orpheus once more – to what is revealed to be another painter's portrait of Héloïse.

Here Héloïse is depicted with a young child, perhaps five or six years old, who presumably is hers with her husband, the Milanese gentleman. Marianne regards this portrait with feeling more complex than simple surprise. She is then deeply moved when she notices what Héloïse is painted holding on her lap: a book, held partly open by her right hand to reveal a page number, "28." Of course it was on page 28 in their copy of the *Metamorphoses* that Marianne drew her self-portrait: we have not forgotten, and quite obviously nor has Marianne. She is therefore thunderstruck, since, as she must have hardly dared to hope, Héloïse, too, has evidently been haunted by that same emotionally charged moment of (self-)reflection even years into her new and separate life. From the past perspective of the two women as lovers, that future – now present – life for Héloïse was a kind of 'living death,' implicitly the figurative equivalent of mythic Eurydice's real demise.

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12   We might compare, e.g., how actors Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller traded the roles of Victor Frankenstein and the creature every night in Nick Dear's play *Frankenstein* (Royal National Theatre 2011). In contrast, Marianne and Héloïse are not doppelgangers, although *Portrait* draws on horror (discussed below).

Thus at this moment, Marianne-as-Orpheus looks back once more and sees Héloïse-as-Eurydice both loving her still and, heartbreakingly, lost.

Marianne's return to her role as painterly Orpheus is emphasized in this scene's second evocation of the myth. In her own entry to the gallery show, Marianne has painted an "Orpheus and Eurydice." An attendee – one of two men in speaking roles – observes about the painting what we might well, too. Whereas the myth is more traditionally painted at the iconic moment of Orpheus 'turning around' or after Eurydice has died, Marianne has chosen an interstitial moment, when Eurydice is in the midst of being snatched back down to the Underworld. With each figure reaching for the other, as the attendee notes, "They seem to be saying 'goodbye.'" It is a heartbreaking moment, emphasizing shared but separate experience of loss. Indeed, the painting could therefore suggest a kind of Aristotelian *catharsis* or 'cleansing of negative feeling' (*Poetics* 1449b): once a tragedy has passed, spectators may finally experience a lessening of tension – and what are the characters in *these* stories, in the myth and in the film, if not 'spectators' exquisitely conscious of their experience of meaningful looking?[13]

We return to Aristotelian analysis of drama below. Still in the current scene, the connection between the myth as painted by Marianne and the filmed story is deepened by two additional details. First, the setting in the painting is the rocky place at the shore where Marianne and Héloïse spent parts of several days, eventually had their first physical contact – helping each other down a difficult path – and, crucially, shared their first kiss.[14] Second, Marianne's blue outfit for the show recalls Orpheus' in the painting – and recalls as well the blue cloak worn rather by Héloïse during their time on Brittany. Indeed, the cloak was at first all that could be seen of her, as Marianne followed behind and the camera replicated her gaze. Walking ahead at that point, Héloïse was – we see now, in retrospect – an Orpheus figure. In the visual echo of her cloak, it is as if Marianne has adopted that first aspect of Héloïse for her own, now more-Orpheic persona. Part of *Portrait*'s beauty consists in that continuous shimmering exchange of roles. It is emphasized in Marianne's painting here by the mirroring between the two mythic characters – a reading of the scene made possible by the parity between the two women.[15]

Indeed, at this point we must recall that it was Héloïse, although ostensibly the painted subject, who raised the possibility that it was, not Orpheus, but Eurydice who decided the course of events by commanding her artist-lover to 'turn around.' That idea, given voice in the philosophical-dialogue scene, is brought to life in the film's own version of the myth's iconic moment, to which we are now at last able – if perhaps not 'ready' – to turn.

"What if it was Eurydice who told [Orpheus] to turn around?"

Portrait may be read as an extended version of the counterfactual possibility or alternate history raised by that question. On this reading, the crucial change to the ancient myth is not that of gender – although of course that matters greatly – but of *agency*. The possibility of Eurydice's agency, voiced during the debate, is realized when Héloïse, on the verge of being left behind, commands Marianne to "Turn around!" (in the French, "Retourne-toi !"): the only time either main character addresses the other informally.

In Aristotelian fashion, that moment of 'recognition,' or *anagnorisis*, is also the plot's 'tragic turning point,' or *peripeteia* (*Poetics* 1452a). Marianne-as-Orpheus *does* turn around, and the consequences follow as in the myth: a loss that is, effectively, a death. Although Héloïse-as-Eurydice does not literally die, her fate is sealed, and what Marianne sees is seared into her memory. Just previously, Héloïse's mother has returned – and brought with her the dress that Héloïse will wear in marriage to her future husband. When Marianne, leaving the house, obeys the command to 'turn around,' she sees Héloïse in the dress. The camera as usual adopts her perspective, and as the door to the house closes, the figure in the dress appears nearly shock-white against the sudden darkness.

The emotion is emphasized by the cinematography. The film generally uses diffuse lighting, including candle and firelight and a scaffold system to light interiors from outside. In particular, the women's faces and

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13   This is not to ignore difficulties in the concept of *catharsis* in Aristotle (cf. *Politics* 1341b33-1342a29) and in its receptions; see, e.g., Halliwell (1986:168-201) and Völher 2010.

14   I am grateful to *Frontière·s*'s anonymous reviewer for noting that the difficult path might evoke Orpheus' and Eurydice's ascent from the Underworld (cf. Virgil's influential formulation: "easy is the descent into Avernus… but to retrace your step and make it out to the upper air, that is the work, that is the labor," *facilis descensus Averno… sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras, / hoc opus, hic labor est*; Aen. 6.126 and 128-129), while grottoes are a characteristic location in ancient myths.

15   Cf. Muredda (2020: 115) on this "reciprocal gaze" and Smith 2020b on Haenel as "an object of desire who looks back" (118) – a reading complicated, as Smith acknowledges, by Haenel's and Sciamma's romantic relationship.

bodies are rarely locations of high contrast.[16] This moment departs from that naturalistic lighting scheme to borrow from a different genre, horror: Héloïse is pictured as a kind of ghost or *revenant*.

If that surprises us – we have expected the 'lady on fire' and, once seeing her, may feel that tricky photography is done – our response is only a fraction of Marianne's. For her view of Héloïse here explains the strange intrusion of the same ghostly image at two earlier points in the narrative. In a film that is almost all flashback, those proleptic visual echoes of Héloïse are Marianne's memory involuting. As painterly Orpheus, she must live with the image of her beloved Eurydice's living death.

Indeed, such is the film's commitment to telling the story from Marianne's memory that the feeling of this final moment of loss haunts even the – flashback – depiction of the first time she sees (and we see) Héloïse. As noted just above, when Marianne follows Héloïse from the house for the first time, she can at first see only her would-be subject's cloak and then, as the hood falls, her blonde hair. Finally, upon reaching the edge of a cliff, Héloïse turns and looks back. She had suddenly started to run, and upon turning she is still breathing hard from the exertion – as her expression implies, a kind of exaltation in movement as a small experience of freedom. She has been kept in the house, and in particular kept from the shore, out of her mother's fear that she would follow in her late sister's footsteps and throw herself into the sea. Marianne too had started running, afraid: not yet having met Héloïse, already she feared that she would lose her.

But of course this, too, is memory, and so the sense of loss is doubled. At that moment in the past, Marianne feared that she would lose Héloïse. Reliving it again in flashback, she *knows* that she *already has*. Thus the repeated appearance of Héloïse dressed for marriage and lensed as if in horror is only the most overt haunting in the film. In my view, the most powerful is this first appearance, when she is visibly so alive – and implicitly, in memory, already lost.

If that is unendurably tragic, so much the more cathartic is that first encounter's echo in the film's final scene. Just after the gallery show, Marianne attends a concert, and just before it begins, she sees Héloïse in the balcony opposite. The (unseen) orchestra plays Vivaldi's "L'estate" (Concerto No. 2 for violin in Gm, Op. 8 RV 315) – the same movement that, years before, Marianne had haltingly begun to play for Héloïse on a harpsichord. That earlier scene gave just a few incomplete bars; now, the piece is played in full as the camera stays fixed on Héloïse.

"She did not see me," says Marianne in a rare voiceover: her sometimes-Orpheus did not turn around. Watching in real time, we hope that she would, wishing it at the screen… even as, per the folk-tale logic of the myth, the *gain* of such a look back could have been only a deepened *loss*. In *not* getting a final look back, Marianne gets instead to live on. Héloïse, in turn, stays fixed on the orchestra. As the piece continues, she starts to cry, at the same time also smiling: a return to exaltation, indeed very nearly the sublime.

Here we may note, as others have, that this moment echoes the final scene of Luca Guadagnino's 2017 *Call Me by Your Name* (*CMBYN*), with the camera fixed on a character's tearful face as emotional music plays.[17] In the spirit of its metamorphic Ovidian source, however, *Portrait* has made changes. *CMBYN*'s extra-diegetic recorded music is replaced in *Portrait* by live music from the diegetic orchestra. Even more significantly, in place of *CMBYN*'s disembodied gaze – we are, impossibly, watching from inside the active fireplace, as if both seeing and forming part of the lighting – the last, long and longing look in *Portrait* is, of course, from Marianne's perspective.

Such is the film's commitment to storytelling via the single character's memory – reflecting her own devotion to the other character's idea, made into action, of Eurydice telling Orpheus to turn around. The final scene thus emphasizes, once more, the emotional consequence of our Orpheus' decision, when she made "not the lover's choice, but the poet's": she has, and so we have, only an image which, for all its indelible power, cannot replace the person once they are gone.

"Portrait of a lady on fire" ("Portrait de la jeune fille en feu")

We began by noting how we get to see the titular "Portrait" only briefly at the beginning of the film. We may conclude with what we are given to see in full at the midpoint, indeed the turning-point of the story. In the scene that directly follows on their discussion of Ovid, Marianne sees Héloïse at night across a seaside bonfire. The hem of Héloïse's dress, which she has brought too close to the flames, starts to burn.

Of course this is the "lady on fire" scene. Its status as central turning-point is powerfully emphasized by its being one of only three scenes including music: in this case, a haunting a cappella chorus that seems to

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16   Discussed by Mathon in O'Falt 2020b and Yonca 2020.
17   On CMBYN's classical receptions, see Stevens 2018 and Rutherford 2018.

emerge organically from the society of women around the fire. With its harmonies stacking ever higher, and with dynamics rising to match, the song is a kind of aural reflection of the flames. How striking, then, that the lyric, endlessly repeated, is *fugere non possunt*, Latin for "they cannot flee."[18] Of course the fire symbolizes the passion that has sparked between the two main characters. But it also embodies the film's idea about the freighted nature of desirous looking, as the fire both makes sight possible – without it, Héloïse would go unseen in the night – and threatens to consume (a visual echo of the winds in Ovid's version of the Adonis myth).

That paradoxical threat is realized more fully, if figuratively, at another point, when Marianne scrutinizes a previous artist's attempt at Héloïse's portrait and then burns it. The same candle first lights the image and then ignites the oil-paint of Héloïse's dress, which she wears at the bonfire.[19] Having avoided death by water, Héloïse is thus symbolically 'destroyed' by fire: a vivid depiction – a holocaust by iconoclasm – of the consequence to the "poet's choice" to turn around.

Another image of Héloïse, too – another potential memory – is also destroyed: Marianne's own first attempt at painting her portrait. Seeing it, Héloïse asks, "And so there is no life to it?" (*Il n'y a pas de vie ?*). Flustered, Marianne replies that "there are rules, conventions, ideas" in portraiture (*il y a des règles, des conventions, des idées*). Even as she speaks she knows her argument is weak; soon, she ruins the already-failed painting by smearing away Héloïse's face. To have painted the better "Portrait" later, Marianne must have found the strength to break those rules, flout convention, develop her own ideas. We have seen that confirmed by her "Orpheus and Eurydice." Bracketed by those two symbolic paintings, the filmed *Portrait* centers on the emotional discovery of how *looking at* someone must ultimately become *looking back*.[20] As the main characters well know – indeed, as they dramatize, both enacting it for us and voicing it for each other – since life cannot last, we are left in the end with only memory.

Conclusion

If the 'lady on fire' scene is thus the memory behind the painting, an interest in memory is implied first of all in the *mise en abyme* of the title. *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* ("Portrait of a <u>young lady in fire</u>") recalls the second volume of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, namely *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleur* ("In the shadow of <u>young ladies in flower</u>"). The echo helps emphasize, as the English translation does not, that Héloïse is a 'young' lady. Her loss or living death is thus the more heartbreaking: nearly in the manner of ancient-epic depiction of 'beautiful death,' with its repeated imagery of fallen flowers, in a phantom echo she was, like Proust's 'young ladies,' 'in flower,' that is, in the late spring and early summer of her life.[21]

Second, the 'shadow.' As if the opposite of the film's 'fire' but, as in the painting, rather flowing from it, this 'shadow,' like English 'shade,' can also mean 'ghost.' Here again is an appropriately faded emphasis on deathliness, implying from the beginning Héloïse's status as ghost or *revenant* in the narrator's memory. When is seeing an oil-painting like tasting a madeleine?[22]

Finally, I would say that the film's most obvious departure from Proust, the same as its difference from Ovid's tale, helps set it apart: it is a story of love and loss between women. Under Sciamma's direction, and with Mathon's lensing, the women's regard for each other – like their views on the myth – dictates how we viewers, too, are able to see them. How women are seen is a concern of Sciamma's throughout her filmog-

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18 Sciamma intended the scene's elements to "convoke the imagery [of] witches," with the repeated Latin of the song suggesting an incantation: *fugere non possunt* is her own adaptation of the last part of Nietzsche's 574th entry in *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, "The higher we rise, the smaller we seem to those *who cannot fly*" ("Je höher wir uns erheben, um so kleiner erscheinen wir denen, *welche nicht fliegen können*," emphases added, translation mine); see O'Falt 2020a. I wonder whether there has been confusion between two different meanings for 'fly' in English, the one 'fly in the air' (German *fliegen* as in the Nietzsche, Latin *volare* -> French *voler*), the other 'flee' (Germ. *fliehen*, Lat. *fugere* as in the song -> Fr. *fuir*). I owe to *Frontières*'s anonymous reviewer the suggestion that the society of women may also recall the Maenads in Ovid's tale: like the women's song in *Portrait*, the Maenads' music affects the story (*Met.* 11.15-19 for their Bacchic music, with consequences in the lines following).

19 Thematic lighting was part of the production process: e.g., Mathon has observed that "the big decision when doing a period film" is "What are you doing with the candles?" (O'Falt 2020b, emphasis original; cf. Talu 2020).

20 Cf. Muredda 2020: *Portrait* "elucidates the responsibility of artists to invent new, more personal ways of looking, rooted in invention rather than moored in tradition" (109), and in particular Marianne "invent[s] … a new kind of image to commemorate a transformative relationship": "a new kind of figurative portrait" (116). *Portrait* leaves open the question when exactly Marianne painted the "Portrait," although clearly sometime after leaving Brittany and before painting her "Orpheus and Eurydice."

21 Hence, perhaps, the movement from Vivaldi's «L'estate»; Sciamma's three previous feature films – *Water Lilies* (2007), *Tomboy* (2011), and *Girlhood* (2015) – comprising a loose 'trilogy' of coming-of-age stories centered on girls and young women, all feature at least one dance scene to diegetic recorded music; Sciamma had not planned a trilogy, but the fact suggested itself once *Girlhood* was finished (Cadenas 2015).

22 Mathon emphasizes that the ghostly images of Héloïse were "save[d] … for the end of the shoot," with the production process thus echoing her transformation from present living person to only memory (Talu 2020).

raphy and of course it should matter to us, too.[23] In a cultural context in which the most frequently entered search term for pornography is "lesbian", it matters that *Portait*'s images are not developed for the (traditional cishetero) 'male gaze' (unlike, e.g., in Abdellatif Kechiche's 2013 *Blue is the Warmest Color* [*La Vie d'Adèle – Chapitres 1 & 2*]).[24] Similarly, in contrast to how lesbian characters in film and television are killed in disproportion to their frequency of appearance on screen, *Portrait* is not grisly: despite an occasional evocation of horror, and although it is mythically deathly, its elegiac feeling comes rather from loss of love than from loss of life as such.[25] If paradoxical, the film's retelling of the myth is thus powerful: although any story of loss is heartbreaking, it can also be, as *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* surely is, life-affirming.

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23 Aspects of Sciamma's other films could be read as Ovidian. All are 'metamorphic,' centered on female characters in the midst of change, and as in Ovid's epic, most of the changes involve perceptions of sexuality. Thus, e.g., *Water Lilies* examines how adolescent girls are scrutinized and sexualized within patriarchy (Flanagan 2020), such that its topic of synchronized swimming might evoke myths of water-nymphs pursued by would-be 'lovers,' while metamorphosis is perhaps suggested as well in the original title, *La naissance des pieuvres* («The birth of octopodes»). More specifically, *Tomboy* could be read as a version of the story of Daphne and Apollo: its main character wishes to identify as male but is compelled by others to present as female (cf. Wilson 2020), a conflict encoded in the difference between their chosen name, «Mickaël», and their given name, «Laure» (after the Latin equivalent of Greek 'Daphne') and symbolized in scenes of running in the woods, like Daphne in her emulation of the woodland goddess, Artemis. *Girlhood* seems less specifically Ovidian; see Heeney 2020 and Smith 2020a, and otherwise on Sciamma's films, Heeney and Smith 2020.

24 Anna Pulley, "Why lesbian porn dominates 10 Years Of Pornhub data", *Salon*, 17.9.2017. Online: https://www.salon.com/2017/09/17/why-does-lesbian-porn-dominate-milf-and-much-more-in-10-years-of-pornhub-data_partner/. For the 'male gaze' in film, see esp. Mulvey 1975, and on criticism of Kechiche's film, Emily Greenhouse, "Did a Director push too far?", *The New Yorker*, 24.10.2013. Online: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/did-a-director-push-too-far

25 Matt Webb Mitovich, "GLAAD Report: LGBTQ Representation Hits High, But Broadcast TV 'Failed Queer Women, Sends Toxic Message'", *TVLine*, 3.11.2016. Online: https://tvline.com/2016/11/03/glaad-tv-study-lesbian-female-deaths/

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