

Portrait of a Lady on Fire

She's Staying

As with Maurice Ravel's "Pavane for a Dead Princess" (*Pavane pour une infante défunte*), the title of director Céline Sciamma's film (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*) loses alliteration in translation. Sciamma's stated goal in this film is to restore subjectivity to women in a narrative of equality and consent that creates tension and suspense with neither conflict nor domination. Intelligence, refinement and efficiency allow the film to be impactful in spite of its simplicity and austerity. It stands as a paramount example of the reciprocal, collaborative and egalitarian nature of the female gaze. Bruce Adolphe says that the musical forms employed by Mozart "are about subverting expectations constantly." Similarly, Sciamma's film subverts multiple narrative traditions and conventions, love at first sight being just one example. (She also takes for granted most of the threshold guardians that her characters might have been expected to confront.)

When the characters in this film read the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, they do so not in a perfunctory, uncritical manner that would merely provide the audience with a remedial tutorial so that a later climactic moment will be understood. Instead, they analytically interrogate the myth. In a welcome twist, when the myth is restaged, it is done so on the descent rather than the ascent. (This scene is also reminiscent of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, in which is outlined a spiritual descent that brings one to an ultimate moment of decision where feelings of attachment cause the upper spiritual realms to be finally closed off behind one.) Even if Héloïse issues the command to turn around, Marianne complies voluntarily, thus making "the poet's" choice. Additionally, as if already remembrances of a former love, Marianne has premonitory visions of Héloïse dressed as she will be for her big Eurydice moment. And in her very first appearance, Héloïse provides an aspirational model for the Orpheus dynamic (as observed by "phadtare" via Twitter). After emerging from her dark home into the light of day, she makes the "lover's choice" by waiting an appropriately long time before turning around, thus successfully "rescuing" Marianne, at least until the roles are reversed. Before turning, Héloïse acts as if she will imitate her sister by leaping to her death, as if voluntarily returning to the underworld, and not just metaphorically. This introduction of Héloïse, where the back of her head is the only part of her initially in view, is echoed in the art exhibition scene, which begins with a view of the back of Marianne's head as she walks away before finally turning around.

As to the potential consequences of disobediently turning around, mention could be made of Lot's wife. But sticking to the myth at hand, Eurydice learns the hard way that being viewed can even be fatal. This is the mythological extreme that underscores the subject/object dichotomy that is a major theme in the film. Mirrors serve as a convenient shortcut to this issue several times. (Mirrors are also a reminder that Ovid writes not only of Orpheus and Eurydice but also of Narcissus.) At one point, Héloïse and Marianne nearly break the fourth wall when looking from the model's position to that of the painter, slightly off-camera. The audience, the ultimate subject, gets a taste of being the object. Héloïse gets a taste of being a subject and collaborator. But near the end of the film, pessimistically, her "eyes are closing." In the final line of dialogue in the film,

Marianne says of Héloïse, “She didn’t see me.” In the meantime, Sophie’s abortion gives Héloïse the opportunity to advocate for an artistic imperative, as she prods Marianne not only to look but to show solidarity and bear witness by painting. Also, the transcendence of subject/object duality may be seen as a metaphorical echo of the mystical goal of not merely beholding God but of merging with the divine.

Though Ovid was not the first to tell the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice (which in turn echoes earlier rescue myths such as that of Inanna and Dumuzid), one may offer him an affectionate nod by speaking of the “metamorphosis” from object to subject. Emblematic of this is the hallucinatory moment when Héloïse’s blue eyes darken to match those of Marianne, as if Héloïse commandeers the very eyes that have been observing her, or as if Marianne were seeing her own eyes in a mirror. Héloïse’s mother earlier recalls confronting her portrait that was “waiting for” her. The director has spoken of the way the final shot functions as a mirror, with the audience sitting in a theater being consoled by art as it views Héloïse doing the same.

After losing Eurydice, Orpheus is killed by a group of women. After losing Héloïse, Marianne has a much less threatening encounter with her class of female students. Marianne dives into the sea and achieves an Orphic rescue of canvases destined to bear the likeness of Héloïse, just as the painting of Héloïse from which the film derives its title is retrieved from “stock” by a student. (Also note that Marianne’s student “turn around” to look at this painting.) Héloïse later bathes in those same waters in an episode that holds the potential for both a Star-is-Born suicide attempt and a Birth-of-Venus emergence from the sea. Both events may also be seen as either baptismal or an act of purgation. While on the topic of the sacraments, marriage looms ominously in the background and mention is made of holy orders. And contrasting with ecclesiastical communion (which Marianne has already mentioned twice), Marianne and Héloïse engage in a secular variety wherein water passes between their mouths just as a bit of seedcake passes between the mouths of Molly and Leopold Bloom. Bread and wine can always be given a Eucharistic spin, while tobacco makes for perfectly good incense. Further, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* begins with three male characters isolated in a Martello tower near the sea. One of these men (Mulligan) implicitly analogizes the group to The Holy Trinity. Marianne, Héloïse and Sophie constitute a comparable alternative female trio.

The myth of Orpheus is often specified as a prototype for one of the seven basic plots. Another of these plots is typified by the story of Faust. Marianne, Sophie and Héloïse take turns enacting various aspects of the myth (“She always stays ahead of me.” “She was behind me and vanished.”) as all three also get a chance to pose in the green dress. In fact, echoes of all the basic plots may be found in this film. The element of forbidden love is obvious. In the context of the basic plots, it is standard practice to distinguish the story of Tristan and Isolde from that of Romeo and Juliet and to count them separately. As explained in the essay on *Like Water for Chocolate*, this amounts to splitting hairs. Sophie may be thought of as a Cinderella figure who may not be rewarded with a Prince Charming, but at least gets a chance (after initially hesitating when offered a hand by Héloïse on the beach) to see for herself that “equality is a pleasant feeling.” (And with the father of her child completely out of the picture, she also has something of the Virgin Mary about her.) Circe’s island is where men are turned to swine. Here they are at least turned into absentees. Marianne’s Faustian bargain is that she is paid to paint a portrait that will subsequently give Héloïse “to another.” (In the musical treatment of the Faust story by Hector Berlioz, Faust asks Marguerite if she dreamed of him, and she replies that she was waiting for him. Marianne and Héloïse engage in similar dialogue.) Although perhaps ethically

obliged to maintain a certain professional detachment, Marianne's susceptibility to desire may be her fatal flaw that reflects the vulnerability of Achilles.

Earlier essays in this series have acknowledged characters undeterred by the prospect of hell, such as Tristan and Huckleberry Finn, and those satisfied with hell once residing there, such as the characters in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. Joseph Campbell applies this view to characters in George Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*, referring to hell as "exactly where you want to be." This film's Latin chant *Non possum fugere* ("I cannot flee" or "flight is not possible" or, as Colonel Saito says in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* saying, "Escape is impossible!") is rendered ironically moot if one would choose not to escape even when it is possible. (The lyric could also be "*Fugere non possum*," Latin being an inflected language in which word order is seldom crucial.) Also heard in this chant are the lyrics "*Nos resurgemus*" ("We rise"), and it is from a woman at this gathering that Héloïse obtains an ointment that reputedly allows one to transcend both spatial and temporal constraints.

In the essay on *Heavenly Creatures*, it was observed that a phenomenon such as the scent of sulfur could have a mystical, symbolic cause even in the presence of a proximal, instrumental cause that allows for plausible deniability. The earlier, abandoned portrait of Héloïse ignites when Marianne holds a candle near it, and Héloïse is near a bonfire when her dress ignites. In both cases, Marianne's regard may be a more satisfying source of these blazes. And the specific location of ignition on the painting echoes *The English Patient* with a reminder that "the heart is an organ of fire." Retrospectively, prior to meeting Héloïse, Marianne sits nude by the fireplace and is warmed by it. (There are actually half a dozen or so shots with fire directly behind Marianne.) Later in the film, Marianne seems as if she could make such an exchange of heat reciprocal. A clue may be taken from the Gottfried von Strassburg's version of Tristan as to why Héloïse remains nonchalant when her dress catches fire. If one is already burning with passion, then a few additional physical flames are of little consequence. (This also relates to saturation [zero-order] kinetics in enzyme chemistry.) It is as if she were saying, quite literally, "What's the difference?" (Coincidentally, this film is set mostly in Brittany, Tristan's birthplace. And Tristan's lover Iseult succeeds in her trial by ordeal when heat fails to burn her.) After walking alone, Héloïse says that she felt Marianne's absence, the absence of one's beloved being the pain to which the fires of hell are said to be secondary. Acceptance of fire also suggests *suttee*, which is traditionally seen as an Orphic act of female heroism. On a lighter note (and related to the film's flying metaphor), Gene Kelly's Gabey in *On the Town* says that the top of the Empire State Building will not seem high because, thanks to love, he is "in the clouds already." One could also cite Ilsa in *Casablanca* asking, "Is that cannon fire? Or is it my heart pounding?" (One might also recall the story told by Hallaj about the moth seeking and ultimately *being* the flame.)

During the time that Marianne is surreptitiously observing Héloïse, Marianne is heard in voiceover reviewing some conventions of portraiture. It could be that the audience is being allowed to eavesdrop on Marianne's thoughts at that moment. It could also be that the film's framing device is not absolutely discreet, such that the entirety of the earlier story is being recalled by Marianne as she lectures her students, with elements of the lesson erupting here onto the film's soundtrack. A related phenomenon of anachronistic displacement within Marianne's memory could account for her visions of Héloïse in the white dress that had not yet entered the story, what Luciano Berio calls "remembering the future."

During the "flashback" part of the film, the only men seen are those who shuttle people on and off the island, one of whom may be responsible for Sophie's pregnancy. At least one other is implied. Héloïse says that she will go to Mass and later speaks of having done so. She may be

referring to an alternative rite such a Black Mass. But a proper Catholic Mass requires a male celebrant. Of all the peripheral or implied males in the entire story, Marianne's father seems at least to have the potential to be quite an admirable person, given that he will apparently allow his daughter to inherit his business. In the framing segment of the story, the little old man who speaks with Marianne at the art exhibition is partially framed by two paintings that include phallic, columnar elements, as if to be reminders of patriarchy. One of these pictorial elements seems to be a broken column, perhaps an optimistic symbol of future patriarchal obsolescence, broken columns being associated with Masonic obituaries and sometimes marking tombs to symbolize premature death. (Also note their appearance in *The Tempest* by Giorgione.) The theme of premature death harmonizes most obviously with the figure of Eurydice directly above the broken column. Incidentally, it is in this scene that Marianne learns the important lesson that when attending such events, one should always read the catalogue thoroughly. One never knows what Easter eggs may be waiting there.

The film plays with the themes of concealment and revelation. Sheets cover many items in Marianne's assigned room. As she peaks beneath them, Marianne's image is revealed in a mirror, which in turn leads to the revelation of the unfinished portrait by another artist. (When Marianne models the green dress in a mirror, her face is not seen, just as in the portrait by that previous artist.) Marianne initially hides her workspace behind a curtain. She plays on a shrouded keyboard until Héloïse uncovers it. The first completed portrait of Héloïse is revealed when Marianne moves from in front of it. When Marianne reveals the true nature of her visit, Héloïse reveals an unprecedented amount of her body by disrobing and bathing in the ocean. For Héloïse, Marianne's first portrait reveals no more true personality than did the faceless one that Marianne burns. (Note that even without the aid of a solvent, the marring of Marianne's first portrait might be accomplished by abrasion alone because, depending on conditions, it can take several days for oil paint to dry completely.) Obeying convention causes Wolfram's Parzival to fail in his first attempt at the grail quest. Marianne falls into a similar trap. Both she and Parzival then earn a second chance. (Though neither Marianne's first portrait nor her first attempt to play Vivaldi is a success, "all's well that ends well.") Basically daring Marianne to improve on this first attempt, Héloïse poses and displays more of her true self. Héloïse is told to uncover her throat. And, of course, unmasking is central to the mechanics of their first kiss.

Héloïse speaks of remembering the card game, as will the audience. But when Marianne says that she will remember Héloïse falling asleep in the kitchen, this must be considered a private memory because the audience is only ever allowed to see Héloïse asleep in Marianne's commandeered reception room. The closest the film comes is when Sophie (possibly falling asleep) drops to floor in the kitchen, saving Marianne from having to answer a question about love (Sophie *ex machina*). Héloïse subsequently sleeps next to Sophie as Marianne sketches.

Marianne mimics the previous painter's unfinished portrait when she poses in the green dress and her head is not seen reflected in the mirror. We viewers are imaginatively free to extend this theme of decapitation even further. On Marianne's last day with Héloïse, a man is discovered to be on the premises and Sophie gives Marianne a knowing look. One can almost imagine that under their diplomatic poker faces, the two women (in the manner of *Heavenly Creatures*) harbor a fantasy (recalling a work by Marianne's artistic predecessor Artemisia Gentileschi) in which Sophie helps this guy play the role of Holofernes to Marianne's Judith. (The film's existing decapitation imagery may foreshadow the French Revolution.)

The reason for the emotional impact of this film is at least partially structural. Anton Chekhov said that a gun seen in the first act is obliged to go off eventually. At least five such metaphorical guns in this film converge at the end to form a Chekhovian firing squad (white dress, “Turn around,” Marianne’s Orpheus and Eurydice painting, page 28, Vivaldi summer concerto). And the autobiographical nature of Marianne’s Orpheus and Eurydice painting even extends to the depiction of a beach and geological arch formation like those from her time with Héloïse. Marianne reinforces this connection by standing beside her painting while dressed in the same blue and brown associated, respectively, with Orpheus and the landscape in her painting.

Some imagine that Héloïse is hearing an orchestra for the first time in the final scene. It is the first time that we the audience witness her having this experience. But she has clearly had many years in which she could have had hundreds of such experiences. Adding to the impact of the finale is the expressive intensity of musicians willing to follow the advice George Kennedy’s Dragline in *Cool Hand Luke* and, metaphorically, “Get mad at dem damned eggs! . . . Chew on it! Gnaw on it!” Bravo to Adrian Chandler and La Serenissima for providing such a spectacular sonic “mic drop.” From Woody Allen’s *Manhattan* comes the idea of the sound of a man sawing a trumpet in half. This is brought to mind by the vigorous ardor to which Chandler subjects his violin. It is also noteworthy that Sciamma reports having choreographed her film to end with a moment of literal inspiration (Héloïse inhales).

The music in the final scene is interesting in another way. It is presumably being made by an orchestra on the stage of the theater in which Marianne and Héloïse sit. But the camera never looks at enough of the stage to confirm this, making the music acousmatic (without a visible source). This ambiguous cinematography is thus unable to contradict the fanciful speculation that Marianne has the power not only to start fires with her gaze, as this essay has already suggested, but to imagine this musical performance and send it telepathically to Héloïse. This could be a private, shared moment during which the others in the scene experience something completely different. As in David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*, it could just be that “*¡No hay banda!* There is no band! *Il n’est pas de orchestra!* . . . It is an illusion.” (Marianne’s namesake Marian Paroo in *The Music Man* could also be cited: “What band?”) This would help explain why a concert would begin with the third movement of the second concerto in a series. Telepathy aside, recalling that the women confess some of the things they remember about their time together, this music deserves a place on that list. Héloïse says that when Marianne thinks of her in the future, it will be the painted image of Héloïse that Marianne sees. This may be the music they both hear when thinking of each other, regardless of what others hear. The same may be true for viewers of the film. When Marianne is heard to say, “She didn’t see me,” it is understood as a voiceover heard exclusively by the cinematic audience. Thus it could still be appropriate that the cinematic audience is hearing this music even if it is being heard diegetically by absolutely no one. Previous essays have addressed the issue of spiritual messages being expressed metaphorically and then misinterpreted as physical (Mosaic vs. Hermetic). Here, too, in addition to the nominal, literal interpretation of this music (the lover’s choice), more fanciful options (the poet’s choice) may be worth considering. (Recall that the title character of the Strauss/Hofmannsthal opera *Elektra* says, “How could I not hear the music? It comes out of me.”) And even if all the film’s music is diegetic, an “L cut” allows the bonfire song to extend into the following scene, highlighting the cinematic artifice. And though the commandeering of a Vivaldi concerto for use as an overture is not implausible, those who take the film’s final scene to be an opera performance must still contend with the visually confirmed absence of an orchestra pit in the theater.

Christoph Willibald Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* (the composition of which was roughly contemporary with the action of this film) poses the musical question, "*Che farò senza Euridice?*" *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* provides a very eloquent answer. This is also approaching the time when Beaumarchais would create the character of Figaro and subvert traditional social hierarchies in the process, an endeavor with which this film nicely harmonizes.

Legions of fans treasure the lesbian aspect of this story. Nevertheless, to qualify as Aristotelian tragedy and to evoke genuine pity (as defined by James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus in the coincidentally titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a book that itself begins with an epigraph taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*), characters must be seen as *human* sufferers, not merely as French, lesbian, etc. Thus when someone disparaged this film for being "extremely white," characters were reduced from human sufferers to racially characterized sufferers and the opportunity for pity was missed. Further, in terms of racial justice, no single film carries the burden of being the remedy for a statistical issue. This film is extremely white and *Atlantics* is extremely nonwhite. All that matters is how things balance out collectively.

Some people use this film as an opportunity to lament the rarity of lesbian stories that end with the protagonists alive and together, a statistical issue for which no individual story is to blame. In her BAFTA lecture, Sciamma says, "Fiction is not a safe space for female characters. They don't get rid of oppression there. You can't artificially free women in fiction." This very much depends on the meaning of the words *you* and *can't*, fiction being such a vast possibility space. One can, but not necessarily in good conscience. Her statement should be taken as echoing James Joyce's contention that proper tragedy is not achieved without engaging with "the grave and constant in human suffering." In this same lecture, Sciamma recounts some of the traditional storytelling clichés from which she abstains in this film. The same applies to Marianne. As if her second portrait of Héloïse were not enough, the commentary made by the little old man regarding her Orpheus and Eurydice painting confirms that Marianne has moved beyond the conventions by which she previously felt constrained. (Likewise, Sophie initially hesitates to accept the helping hand offered to her by Héloïse on the beach but soon sets aside the dictates of protocol, at least temporarily.)

As heartbroken as many viewers are after seeing this film, Sciamma says that this is a story not of an impossible love, but one about how the consoling power of art can help love triumph. In the words of Ira Gershwin, "No, no they can't take that away from me." Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* is like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* in that total commitment results in a happy ending, whereas uncertainty yields sorrow. And in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women*, Jo speaks of having minds as well as hearts. When all aspects of *Portrait* are appreciated (and the concept of catharsis is understood), sadness need not be the only thing gleaned from it. (Even John Dowland's song "Flow my tears" is "strangely uplifting" according to Sting.) Marianne herself assures her student that her sadness was only temporary, and Héloïse spends at least part of the final shot smiling, as if reveling in "the thrill of victory." Even if viewers are inconsolable, Marianne and Héloïse are not. (A pseudonymous wag once offered a metaphorical explanation of catharsis and then accused this writer of "mansplaining" for voicing approval of said explanation, even though it was the wag who had done the explaining. The human mind is endlessly fascinating. Also, Sam Peckinpah confessed to overestimating the audience to which he offered the prospect of catharsis via *The Wild Bunch*.) Pain can yield an ultimately positive experience. (Consider Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*.) And, as in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, loss need not constitute defeat. This film's conclusion can be taken as an exhilarating celebration of both unconquerable love and of cinematic art. Sciamma says of the

story's "lost love" that "it's not lost. It's something you win for life." It may be Héloïse's destiny to be forever bereft of Marianne, but only physically. Even if Héloïse has a drug that "makes time last longer," love can make it irrelevant. (In Pawel Pawlikowski's *Cold War*, Juliette claims "[t]hat time doesn't matter when you're in love.") From her final portrait in the epilogue, Héloïse looks out at the world with effrontery as she simultaneously narrowcasts to Marianne the assurance that spiritually, "We're in the same place." Just as Marianne "can reproduce that image to infinity," Héloïse can mentally conjure Vivaldi's music at will, along with visions of the proprietary love story that it signifies for her. On Héloïse's insistence, however distant Marianne may be in time and space, "She's staying."

The film mercifully provides several moments of humor, such as the card game and the posing session during which Héloïse fails to suppress her smile. The first time an audience usually feels comfortable laughing is when Sophie asks if Marianne has tried to be funny. On rewatch, this writer is happy to laugh as early as Marianne, as if blaming the steersman for the rough seas, shoots him that look that says, "Really?"

The film's many noteworthy examples of nonverbal acting obviously culminate with the last shot. But they also include Marianne's hands in the opening moments, her diabolical look as the previous artist's unfinished portrait burns in the fireplace and Héloïse seeming both surprised and proud of Marianne for (literally) defacing her first portrait. This writer particularly cherishes Héloïse's face in the moments just before Marianne says, "That's what I tell them."

Several films released during the same theatrical season created the the potential for *déjà vu* while watching *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Sophie is suspended with only her feet in view. Later, Marianne turns away from an unpleasant sight but is told by Héloïse to look. Similar things occur in Taika Waititi's *Jojo Rabbit*. The title character of Kelly Reichardt's *First Cow* (released soon after Sciamma's film) is said to have connections with Brittany when Chief Factor explains its lineage. (Looking further back, Sophie's posture of hanging by her hands is also assumed by the title character in Agnès Varda's 1962 *Cléo From 5 to 7*.)

Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* offers a great many parallels:

- Héloïse's dress catches fire just as Jo's does.
- Marianne and Héloïse both experience cold water, as does Amy in Gerwig's film.
- Jo's shoe is prominently featured as she plants it atop a fence that she scales on her way to Aunt March's house, a shot echoed as Marianne prepares to jump off the boat.
- Jo and Marianne both eagerly devour bread after descending stairs.
- Jo and Marianne both spread papers on the floor.
- Jo and Héloïse are both blonde women who are first seen from behind and who soon afterward joyously run.
- Both films involve painting done by a woman in France.
- Both films feature two women sitting together at the beach as one of them reads.
- Marianne reports leaving a convent where she had been punished for unauthorized drawing. Amy leaves school after being punished for the same reason.
- Marianne invokes the poet's choice, which Amy claims she cannot afford.
- Héloïse speaks favorably of a convent library, almost arguing for its sufficiency, while Jo, after seeing Laurie's, claims that she could live on books alone.
- Jo and Marianne both entertain the possibility of financial freedom that would make marriage unnecessary.

- Jo and Marianne both watch items burn in a fireplace (Jo's writings/a previous painter's portrait). Marianne's action also recalls Amy's burning of Jo's novel in that both Amy and Marianne oversee the burning of someone else's work.
- Jo and Marianne both take a deep breath as they muster the courage to go through a door, the former in her film's opening shot and the latter to see Héloïse for what is then assumed to be the last time.
- Marianne's paint-stained hand echoes Jo's ink-stained hands.
- Beth and Marianne both play a keyboard instrument.
- Mr. Lawrence and Héloïse's mother both have a portrait of themselves in their home.
- Laurie speaks of male cultural gatekeepers "cutting down the competition," while Marianne acknowledges the constraints placed on female artists (and also reveals her "secret" means of circumventing some of them).
- Sophie is upset that Orpheus does what he is told not to do, while Beth is told not to go quietly but does so nevertheless.
- Sophie explains Héloïse's limited wardrobe, while Meg says of her violet dress, "I haven't got another."
- Both stories involve the death of a sister.
- Marianne repeatedly withdraws her gaze when Héloïse senses it, while John Brooke does the same when looking at Meg in the theater.
- Some sources (including the film's American distributor Neon) say that Sciamma's film is set in 1760, a number that appears in a New York street scene in Gerwig's. (A date of 1770 is also sometimes given.)
- As cited above, Marianne stands next to a painting that features a broken column. Amy is introduced painting a scene that features some of the numerous columns seen in Paris that may not be broken but are at least supporting nothing.
- Noémie Merlant (Marianne) reminds many of Emma Watson (Meg).
- Gerwig's film begins with the epigraph: "I've had lots of troubles, so I write jolly tales." Similar reasoning may be what prompts Héloïse to ask of a piece of music, "Is it merry?"
- Both films have a female screenwriter/director.
- Gerwig's film is based on the interaction of two timelines, while Sciamma has said that the two timelines in her film intersect via the ghostly vision of Héloïse.
- An Italian city is mentioned in each film, Rome in one, Milan in the other.
- Héloïse remarks that when Marianne observes her, she is reciprocally observing Marianne. Laurie admits that he is looking at Amy while she sketches him.
- "Latin is a privilege," declares John, while Sciamma democratizes Latin by putting it into the mouths of the peasantry. (This is also in accord with what Sciamma calls the "democratic" use of a familiar piece by Vivaldi.)
- Both films feature the emotional return of a piece of music. Gerwig has spoken about playing rock music during the filming of the dance sequences in her film in order to give the actors the feeling that "They're playing our song." When the power inherent in Antonio Vivaldi's music is fortified with personal associations, the result is overwhelming. Vivaldi is also an interesting choice because he wrote much of his music to be performed by women (at the *Conservatorio dell'Ospedale della Pietà* in Venice).

Looking back to earlier films, *Phantom Thread* also features a ghostly female apparition. A visual pun is cited in the essay on *Cold War*, and *Portrait* has one involving an arm pit. *Cold War*'s Zula and Marianne both have outdoor confession about, respectively, "ratting" and painting. The line "I understand you" recalls *Henry and June*. When it is feared that Héloïse is about to leap to her death but does not, it recalls Leontine Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform*. In *Clouds of Sils Maria*, the first number to come up on the roulette wheel is 28. (This is followed by 9, identified in several of these essays as the number of the goddess. Also, looking beyond cinema, the number 28 features significantly in the thinking of Wilhelm Fliess.) The crating of Héloïse's portrait echoes the metaphorical imprisonment of Brigid O'Shaughnessy by the elevator door at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*. And, parenthetically, Héloïse's name refers back (via Jean-Jacques Rousseau) to Héloïse d'Argenteuil, a figure associated with tragic love and convents. The student/teacher relationship between this Héloïse and her lover Peter Abelard may have been the model for an element in Gottfried's story of Tristan and Iseult. Sciamma's Héloïse may thus be seen as being related to both, she having already been compared to Gottfried's Tristan earlier in this essay. Marianne and Héloïse, respectively, say, "Don't regret. Remember" and "I thought of you," sentiments that are symbolized by the flowers offered by Shakespeare's Ophelia: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember: and there is pansies [pensées], that's for thoughts." Curiously, the sprig that Sophie touches and then reproduces in her embroidery resembles rosemary, while pansies might be seen in the later stage of this same piece of work. This embroidery is another example of art preserving transitory beauty (*Vita brevis, ars longa*). Discussing the music of Beethoven, Robert Levin says, "To remember is to be redeemed." (Alma embroiders in *Phantom Thread*, and in the essay on that film, she is associated with themes of eternity.)

To one observer, the film's feminist opposition to arranged marriage seemed anachronistic. Such opposition has in fact been a European literary standard since the twelfth century. Héloïse has been locked away to such an extent that her experience of literature may be as narrow as her experience of music. But Marianne would seem to lack such plausible deniability. To find a less feminist stance, one must look east to India and beyond, where individualism has never been the native attitude and where the ultimate religious goal is the elimination of ego. And let it be remembered that Marianne and Héloïse are fictitious. When issues of plausibility arise in fiction, allowances are to be made, up to and including those made for the characters in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. (This also applies to the disparaging comment on Twitter that white wedding dresses did not become fashionable until three quarters of a century after Héloïse's marriage, whether or not it is actually true.) As with the implausible use of English by characters in *Star Wars*, one buys the premise and goes with it. (In a Criterion featurette, painter Hélène Delmaire admits that the story does not allow enough time for the uncalcined umber base on Marianne's paintings to dry, but also adds the justification that "this is a movie.")

An online commentator who characterizes his review of this film as "condemnatory" finds it implausible that prohibiting the study of male anatomy would be used to suppress female artists. He wonders if J.M.W. Turner or Vincent van Gogh ever painted nude men. What the latter *did* paint brought him vanishingly little success in his lifetime, weakening his relevance in this argument. (He is known to have sold no more paintings in his entire life than the one that Marianne does during her visit to the island alone.) Whether or not either man ever did such painting professionally, such would have been required of them in any major academic setting of their times. Ignoring the statistical insignificance arising from considering only two historical

artists, Marianne works in pre-Revolutionary France, where the demand for classical subject matter would be similar to that depicted and debated in Milos Forman's *Amadeus*. And again, if disbelief cannot be suspended for the benefit of fictional characters, then all bets are off. Thus, such question as whether Marianne's paintbrushes have anachronistic ferrules need not be addressed here.

This same "condemnatory" commentator resented this film for telling him things that he said he could work out for himself (such as the oppression of women) because he is "not an idiot." He demanded that films show him things that he did not already know. If one is not an idiot and there is nothing new under the sun, then what it is that remains unknown? In the personal experience of this writer, entertainment need not depend on ignorance. Just as one can enjoy previously unheard music despite already knowing that a major third is a stable harmonic consonance, one can come to *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* already knowing that the sky is blue without that knowledge presenting any impediment to enjoyment.

One viewer thought it ridiculous that a neglected harpsichord would be in tune. (In this case, the instrument might be more accurately described as a virginal or ottavino.) This being Marianne's memory of this incident, she may simply be remembering it as she wished it to have been. Along similar lines, though the single keyboard E sounded by Marianne seems to be at baroque pitch (approximately a semitone below the corresponding note on a modern pitch pipe, for example), the Vivaldi concerto seems to be performed at modern pitch in both Marianne's keyboard rendition and in the final orchestral version. This is not a problem in context of the cinematic experience, as it simply places the music in the sonic realm of the cinema viewer, who is thus granted a subjectivity that supersedes that of the characters in the film. Just as Marianne remembers her performance as being in tune, we "recall" the music as being at "our" pitch. Marianne's playing is also yet another connection between herself and the musician Orpheus.

In accord with the democratizing of Latin and music mentioned above, division of labor in this story is hierarchical only when absolutely necessary, as when Marianne is told to get *her* things because she is the painter, even though Héloïse explains that "we" are going to paint. Instead of sounding various pitches until a resonance mode of an interior space is detected, the pitch at which the outdoor bonfire chant is to be sung seems to be arrived at by consensus. (Though some have referred to this scene as occurring on the beach, crashing waves are not part of the soundscape, the locale does not seem particularly sandy and our protagonists seem to be ascending on their way there in the preceding "magic hour" shot.) Alongside all this democracy, others have noted the film's subtle exploitation of formal vs. familiar French pronouns. Consistent with linguistic formality (and also amusing, considering what is to come), Marianne asks permission to reposition Héloïse's arm. (Because equality is a major theme in this story, some fans bristle at the idea that Héloïse would be considered a "supporting" character. The story is consistently told from Marianne's point of view, exclusively featuring her flashback and voiceover, and no other characters have scenes to themselves. This *technically* makes Héloïse the deuteragonist, even if she is otherwise Marianne's equal.)

Many viewers confidently (and reasonably) infer that Sophie, displaying admirable discretion, is aware of the affair between Marianne and Héloïse. Sophie's first responsibility is to her employer, not to a fellow employee. Thus when Sophie awakens Marianne on the first "morning after," Sophie should have already checked on Héloïse and found her not to be in her room. On a later day, Sophie is able to report this to be the case because it is her job to keep track of these things.

The suggestion has been made that Sophie continues working on the actual piece of embroidery that was left unfinished by Héloïse's sister. While possible, both textual and visual confirmation are lacking for this. The cloth used by Sophie initially shows no embroidery other than her own, with no sign of the sister's work seen at the beach. Sophie's piece also features a lace border not seen on the sister's.

Repeated hints are given that Héloïse might suspect Marianne's artistic intentions, keeping Marianne unsure about the success of her stealth. It has even been pointed out that the smell of paint in Marianne's room might have given away her secret quite early. When the proper revelation is made, Héloïse seems genuinely surprised.

Some have said that because their ethnicity differs from that of the characters in this film, they were unable to make an emotional connection. One might as well claim an inability to connect with Walt Disney's Bambi because one is not an ungulate.

A few additional random thoughts: The film gains substantially from Adèle Haenel's ability to offer a glare that calls to mind the old joke about a Philadelphia tombstone that reads, "Wudda *you* lookin' at?" ("Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye than twenty of their swords," says Shakespeare's Romeo.) An artifact of the cinematic process is not out of place in a film about the process of creating and observing art. (Racking focus does count because eyes do that as well as cameras.) As Marianne unpacks the first wet canvas, notice the lighting array reflected in it. This could perhaps be rationalized as moonlight coming through a segmented skylight. When Marianne first discovers the keyboard, the single note that she sounds is an E, which could stand for Eurydice. (Admittedly, even for this writer, that is a bit of a stretch.) When it is said that only three scenes in this film feature music, it is with the stipulation that the aforementioned single note does not constitute music. If one is inclined to infer such structures, the second act of this story may be thought of as beginning when Marianne confesses her true mission to Héloïse. The third act may begin with the first appearance of the "ghost" of Héloïse. The point at which the film could be divided into sections related by the golden ratio would be around the time that Héloïse suggests what Eurydice might have said, or just afterward at the start of the bonfire scene. Similar internal proportionalities may exist. For example, as Héloïse and Marianne first walk and then run toward the cliff in their first scene together, the inline shots are interrupted by one that reframes the action to show Marianne running from left to right. Later, forming a nice bit of symmetry, Marianne hurries through the art exhibition crowd from right to left to see the painting of Héloïse. (The payoff in both cases is the revelation of Héloïse's face.) A little more than halfway between these two events, Sophie runs on the beach in both directions. As Marianne warms herself and dries her canvases in front of the fireplace, her wet skirt drips while suspended above the floor on the right side of the frame, foreshadowing the visual rhyme that Sophie will create when she suspends herself in the kitchen with only her skirt visible to the right of the frame. Marianne lights a pipe in both shots, underscoring the rhyme. Marianne's paintings are preceded and followed by portraits of Héloïse done (or at least attempted) by other artists, which form symmetrical artistic brackets. Marianne finds that aspects of music and love are more easily demonstrated than described. Recalling previous essays, especially those on *Phantom Thread* and *Whale Rider*, note that Marianne, Héloïse and Sophie are seen at various times without shoes. Recalling the comparison made earlier with Marianne's two portraits, Parzival's two trials involve the Fisher King. The fishing aspect connects not just with the Christian idea of apostles as "fishers of men" but also with Orpheus charming fish from the water and, by extension, with Marianne "fishing" her supplies out of the sea. Joseph Campbell often cites Heinrich Zimmer's interpretation of Sir Gawain's trial of the Perilous Bed as being symbolic of

the realization on the part of the male that the female psyche is something arbitrary and irrational that can never be understood but can only be endured (and, ideally, quite rewardingly). In the relationship of Marianne and Héloïse, this masculine perspective does not apply, so any trials along the way must be of a different nature. Even though the previous painter's portrait is unfinished and thus leaves the identity of the model indeterminate, it may nevertheless be included among the story's trials by water and fire, as its destruction amounts to burning Héloïse in effigy. The director asserts that this story involves tension without conflict. Perhaps so, but it nears the vicinity of conflict when Marianne's first portrait is evaluated and again when Héloïse says, "You don't support me" and Marianne agrees. (With regard to the first of these two scenes, one notable element of the statement "I didn't know you were a painter" is its literal truth.) It has been noted elsewhere that in the scene where Héloïse literally tests the waters, the sink-or-swim aspect of the conversation can be seen as metaphorical reassurance that the plunge into marriage will be survivable. Héloïse's reaction to Marianne's first portrait recalls the first line of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "Who's there?" The visions of Héloïse in the white dress recall the ghost of Hamlet's father. An artist complained that Marianne is not seen mixing colors on glass, though a pane of glass is seen to be part of her equipment. Because Héloïse enters the theater in the final scene unaccompanied, it is conceivable that she is already be a widow. Laemmle's Claremont theater vertically cropped the film to the wrong aspect ratio, such that when Marianne drew attention to her hands in the opening scene, they were offscreen. This helps explain why, unlike those who wish they could watch this film again for the first time, this writer wishes he could watch it again for the tenth time, when his theatrical viewing experience was finally optimized. In a nice coincidence, Marianne's Orpheus and Eurydice painting is marked with the catalogue number 134, while the film's Criterion Blu-ray is catalogued as spine #1034. On this Criterion release, the initial impact of the bonfire song is blunted by the meager contribution of the surround channels. As in the "*Tuba Mirum*" of the Berlioz *Requiem*, the effect should be that of being inescapably surrounded. And to avoid letting the song function as a spoiler, the audio must be muted while the disc menu is displayed. One theatrically displayed subtitle ("But I also felt your absence.") is replaced with a somewhat clumsier translation.

One final interpretive possibility will be suggested. A YouTube video titled "Gawain: Castle of Marvels and the Perilous Bed" begins with Joseph Campbell saying, "Meanwhile, Gawain starts on his quest, not knowing he's on it, to release The Castle of Marvels/The Castle of Maidens/The Castle of Women. This is a transformation into a Medieval form of the old image of The Isle of Women, which is a very important motif in Celtic romance. It is the Isle of the Dead. And anyone who goes there can't return." Most of *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* takes place in Brittany, which is part of the Celtic world. There, Marianne is ferried to an island by boat. Being conducted to the underworld by boat (as by Charon) is a common mythological theme, one example being the katabasis of Orpheus in his quest to recover Eurydice. With the possible exception of the baby and visitors, only female residents of the island are seen. Inability to leave is expressed in the bonfire song lyrics "*Non possum fugere*." Thus the story could be seen as Marianne's transformative (or metamorphic, thinking again of Ovid) underworld journey.

Marianne sensitizes her students to the hand position of a model, which pays off at the end. (For all we know, the painting of Héloïse and her child could have been done by one of Marianne's former students.) On that note, even though one lesson of the film is that regret is to be avoided in favor of remembrance, regret is hereby expressed that this essay does not extend to 28 pages.