

Choosing to Remember: How *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* Reimagines  
the Tragic Gay Love Story

*Portrait of a Lady on Fire* follows the love story of two women living in 18th century France: Héloïse (Adèle Haenel), who is arranged to be married soon, and Marianne (Noémie Merlant), a painter tasked with painting her wedding portrait. Awareness of the cultural and social constraints imposed on gay love during that time period tells us that this film should be heart wrenching, if not tragic, at best. Yet, Writer and Director Céline Sciamma manages to give us a love story that is bittersweet – one which uplifts and celebrates the progression, and ending, of the relationship between Héloïse and Marianne – by reframing it under the context of a reimagined ending to the Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The scene which sets everything up occurs a little past the halfway mark of the film: Marianne, Héloïse, and her maid, Sophie (Luàna Bajrami), sit at the dining table together after having dinner. Héloïse reads from a book that tells the Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and as she reaches the ending, Sophie protests what she believes to be Orpheus' foolishness in turning around. A discussion amongst the three women ensues:

SOPHIE

No, he can't look at her for fear of losing her.  
That's no reason. He was told not to do that.

HÉLOÏSE

He's madly in love. He can't resist.

MARIANNE

I think Sophie has a point. He could resist. His  
reasons aren't serious. Perhaps he makes a choice.

SOPHIE

What choice?

MARIANNE

He chooses the memory of her. That's why he turns.  
He doesn't make the lover's choice, but the poet's.

HÉLOÏSE

(continuing to read)

"She spoke a last farewell that scarcely reached  
his ears and fell back into the abyss."

There is a long pause, then:

HÉLOÏSE  
Perhaps she was the one who said, "Turn around."

The camera cuts to Marianne, whose slight smile fades. She understands at that moment, before the audience even does, what Héloïse means.

The following night, Marianne senses something behind her as she walks to her room. She turns and sees a vision of Héloïse wearing a white gown; a moment passes and the vision fades. This sequence happens on two separate occasions before Héloïse and Marianne's final day together, which firmly draws the parallel between their story and that of Orpheus and Eurydice. The audience can see what is coming: Héloïse and Marianne will have to say their painful goodbyes soon; there can be no other ending to this love story except for one where they part.

Yet, Sciamma's reimagination of the ending to Orpheus and Eurydice's story frames the goodbye between Héloïse and Marianne differently such that when it happens, we know it is not a tragic one. When Héloïse tells Marianne to turn around in their last moments together, we know that Marianne does so because she *chooses* the memory of Héloïse over the alternative. It is a parting scene in which both women have full agency and make the choice to let the other one go in exchange for the memory of them. The ending of their relationship is not one which they were forced into, but rather, one that they create together.

Sciamma drives the idea of "choosing to remember" home in how she concludes the film. The film does not end with Héloïse and Marianne's parting scene, but rather, Marianne recounting the two times she saw Héloïse after their separation: first at an art gallery, and second at an orchestra performance. Of this second time, Marianne says, "I saw her one last time"; she knows that she will not seek Héloïse out from this point forward. Marianne has committed to choosing the memory of Héloïse, and this is the note on which the film ends. The result is a bittersweet, empowering, and celebratory love story.

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HÉLOÏSE  
I feel something new.

MARIANNE  
What?

HÉLOÏSE

Regret.

MARIANNE

Don't regret. Remember.