

“NOT ORPHÉE.” “NO, NEVER HIM.”: RECLAIMING FEMALE AGENCY FROM OVID’S  
“ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE” IN ALICE MUNRO’S “THE CHIDLREN STAY” AND  
CÉLINE SCIAMMA’S *PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE*

by

Charlene Chow

Honours Bachelor of Arts in English Literature with a Minor in Greek and Roman Studies,  
University of Ottawa, 2019

A Major Research Paper  
presented to Ryerson University  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in Literatures of Modernity

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

©Charlene Chow, 2020

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION FOR  
ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION OF A MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this MRP. This is a true copy of the MRP, including and required final revisions.

I authorize Ryerson University to lend this MRP to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research. I further authorize Ryerson University to reproduce this MRP by photocopying or by any other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my MRP may be made electronically available to the public.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing is a lonely and isolating process, especially when writing in the midst of a global pandemic.

Thankfully, I received a great deal of constant support from my wonderful supervisor, Professor Monique Tschofen. Thank you for your insights, encouragement, and the countless hours of zoom calls.

I would also like to acknowledge my second reader, Professor Laura Fisher. Thank you for not only reading my work on this Major Research Paper, but for your support throughout my degree.

*In myth, women's boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable. Her power to control them is inadequate, her concern for them unreliable. Deformation attends her. She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses. The women of mythology regularly lose their form in monstrosity.*

—Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*

Metamorphoses can be understood as “the action or process of changing in form, shape, or substance [and especially] transformation by supernatural means” (*OED*). Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* focuses on the changing of bodies to other physical forms, but Ovid’s tales of transformation have themselves been transformed into other literary and cultural forms. This paper will pull together different disciplines such as classical, literary, and film studies to examine Ovid’s “Orpheus and Eurydice” from the *Metamorphoses*, and the formalist and feminist adaptations of the tale by women about women: Alice Munro’s short story “The Children Stay” and Céline Sciamma’s film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Munro and Sciamma give their female heroines the agency and voices they lacked in Ovid’s text, where there is a pattern of violence against women, who are silenced usually through some form of destructive transformations of their bodies.

Hélène Cixous argues in her essay “The Laugh of Medusa” that

writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural-hence political, typically masculine-economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that's frightening since it's often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never *her* turn to speak—this being

all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (879)

Cixous continues, “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (875). Munro and Sciamma write about women’s woes and desires and voices, transforming Ovid’s “Orpheus and Eurydice,” a myth told from the male perspective, in order to explore the ways in which women’s very beings and existence are suppressed by men. Their focus is the woman who has been driven from life by her own husband and forced to forgive him anyway. Munro’s “The Children Stay” explores how a woman tries to escape a marriage by means of an affair but is ultimately unable to find freedom. Sciamma offers a solution to the problem by creating a world without men to explore how women can truly flourish—explore themselves, their sexuality, and art—in her film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

This essay aims to extend and build upon the existing scholarship that traces the transformations of the “Orpheus and Eurydice” myth with all its shifting focuses. Scholars have previously traced the movement of “Orpheus and Eurydice” across time and media. For example, Jon Solomon has worked on retellings of “Orpheus and Eurydice” in contemporary film, focusing his attention “on such narrative signatures as retrieval from death, playing a stringed instrument in the face of death, and dying twice” (111). Other scholars have focused on reclaiming the myth for women. For example, Helen Sword has worked on female-centric

retellings in the twentieth century where women writers “have used their newfound intellectual clout to reject woman's traditional Eurydicean role as long-suffering wife, abandoned lover, patient muse, and death-filled archetype” (409). In the retellings by Munro and Sciamma, however, the motif of death from the original tale is recast as relationships with men. In their relationships with men, the women are suppressed and unable to be themselves, unable to explore their sexuality, and unable to engage with art; they are not truly alive.

### **“Orpheus and Eurydice”**

As metamorphosis is the changing of form and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* focuses on the changing of bodies to other forms, it is only fitting that the text itself has been retold and adapted—transformed—by others into many different forms. The *Metamorphoses* has been revisited by many male authors in Western literature—Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Shakespeare—whose works are regarded by scholars to be of stature and importance. Although many men have reformed Ovid's text in their own work, Angela Leighton reminds readers in her work *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* that “[m]ore distantly and archaically, form carries the meaning of beauty or comeliness, a sense which distinctly invokes the shape of the human body” (2-3). Since “[w]hat is formed may be transformed” (2), the transformation of the human body evokes the female body that moves through monthly cycles, grows and shrinks with pregnancy, and in Ovid's work transforms into animals, trees, and constellations.

In Deborah Uman's work on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (a play regarded by many as Shakespeare's most Ovidian), she explores the relationship between transformation and translation and explains that in the early modern period, translation was not only the transfer of words between languages but “literary metaphor and physical metamorphosis, as well as

physical transport of the body from one place to another and spiritual transport of the soul from earth to heaven.” Ovid’s “Orpheus and Eurydice” is a story found in a book full of bodily transformations, however, this particular story focuses on a more subtle changing of forms—the movement between life and death. Orpheus and Eurydice are a newlywed couple when Eurydice is suddenly killed by a poisonous snake. Her new husband Orpheus goes to the underworld in an attempt to bring her back to life. Hades, moved by Orpheus’ skill on the lyre, allows Eurydice to trail behind Orpheus out of the underworld and as long as he does not look back at her, she will be allowed to live. Famously, Orpheus looks back, and she dies once more (Ovid, 225-8).

Although Eurydice is the one who dies (twice!), the entirety of the story is told from Orpheus’ perspective. He is the agent of her death when he turns around, and she does not get a voice in her own story:

He turned his eyes—and straight she slipped away.

He stretched his arms to hold her—to be held—

And clasped, poor soul, naught but the yielding air

And she, dying again, made no complaint

(For what complaint had she save she was loved?)

And breathed a faint farewell, and turned again

Back to the land of spirits whence she came.

The double death of Eurydice

Stole Orpheus’ wits away. (226-7)

Orpheus is met with forgiveness so immediate that there is not a hint of anger from Eurydice. In fact, in this instant, she only breathes a farewell (we are never even told her exact words). She does not express shock or exasperation—nothing—at his impatience to see her. Orpheus is the

one who has done wrong by turning around, yet he is the one the reader is made to sympathize with. “The double death of Eurydice / Stole Orpheus’ wits away”—but what of Eurydice? Eurydice is shoved into spatial and formal constraints (in parentheses), “(For what complaint had she saved she was loved?)” (226). The story is Orpheus’—*he* turns *his* eyes; *he* stretches *his* arms to hold her. *He* is the poor soul who clasped naught by the yielding air. Not only is the focal point of the myth his grief and suffering while Eurydice’s soul moves between life and death, but his skill on the lyre, which he uses to bargain for her life impresses even the god of the underworld and establishes him as a great musician. He is even heralded as the first poet. His songs after her death become the next stories in book X of the *Metamorphoses*, meaning that his voice has taken over even the narrator’s voice on a meta level. Eurydice’s deaths have created for Orpheus the image of a great artist with a tortured soul. He is a musician while she does not have the opportunity to engage with art, much less speak, and her movement between life and death is bargained for and arranged by her husband.

The silenced woman is a trope repeated elsewhere in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Many women are silenced, sometimes violently through transformations of their bodies. For example, Philomela’s tongue is cut out, Io is turned into a heifer, and Daphne is turned into a tree. All three women attempt to escape sexual predators. Women are frequently victims of men in Ovid’s text and they rarely get a voice in the story. Despite the different modes of silencing carried out against women, however, the women still take actions that carry deep meaning—they find other ways to communicate. Philomela weaves her story into a tapestry, Io writes her name in the sand, and Daphne’s branches only *seem* to bend to Apollo’s will—it is a question of interpretation. Translation can be understood as rendering something from one form to another, one language to another—a form of transformation. In order to translate, one must interpret and reinterpret the



text. In her roundtable talk with Jia Tolentino concerning sexual violence in Ovid, Classics scholar Stephanie McCarter, who is currently translating Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into iambic pentameter for Penguin Classics (and will become the first woman to translate the epic into English), claims that many rape scenes in the *Metamorphoses* have been translated into other languages by men as consensual. For example:

The words Ovid uses are almost a formula for rape—*vim passa est*. *Passa est* means “to endure”; we get the word *passion* from it, but it also suggests being *passive*. And it is sometimes technical for being sexually penetrated. *Vim* is from *vis*, “force,” which is legally a word for rape. It didn't exclusively mean rape. But if you were going to be tried for rape in the Roman world, you were likely going to be charged with *vis*. This formula gets repeated again and again. I was just looking at the short episode of Dryope, another woman raped by Apollo who turns into a tree, with lots of echoes of Daphne. It says she was not a virgin since she'd endured the god's force, *vim dei passam*. That scene gets translated as consensual as well. Some completely ignore the phrase *vim passam*. In Stanley Lombardo's translation, she simply “lost her virginity to Apollo,” and in Horace Gregory's she “gave her virginity” to him. (McCarter)

Not only are women often not given a voice in the *Metamorphoses*, but through translation, the sexual violence against women is smoothed over and erased. Women in the stories become metatextually silenced further, that is, they are silenced by men who exist outside of the text in which they reside—the male translators of the *Metamorphoses*.

When “Orpheus and Eurydice” is transformed and retold by women, however, the women become the protagonists and are given agency and voices. This essay will examine the

formalist and feminist qualities of the *Metamorphoses* and how they have been transformed, first examining Alice Munro's "The Children Stay" and then Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*.

### **"The Children Stay"**

Alice Munro examines how womanhood, female sexuality, and motherhood are stunted and suppressed by traditional gender roles and heterosexual relationships in her short story "The Children Stay." Twenty-six-year-old Pauline attempts to escape her marriage by way of an affair with another man but learns that she must leave him too in order to be true to herself. Perhaps women cannot flourish when they are in a romantic relationship with a man. In this loose retelling of "Orpheus and Eurydice," Pauline is re-cast as Eurydice and her relationships with the two men are representative of her two deaths. She is smothered by the traditional gender roles enforced by Brian's parents, her husband Brian, and her lover Jeffrey.

Pauline's existence is strictly guided by her roles as a mother and a wife. She is the protagonist, yet she is introduced as "Pauline, the young mother" (153) as if being a mother is what her whole identity depends on. In contrast, Brian, the father of her children, is introduced as "his [father's] son, Brian, who is Pauline's husband" (153). Although they are both young parents, Pauline is stuck with the role of the mother whereas Brian is someone's son and someone else's husband. Furthermore, Jeffrey, the man with whom she has her extramarital affair, is introduced as his mother's "grown son" (155). Brian and Jeffrey are both adult men, but both are introduced in terms of their parents. Their identities hang on being sons, suggesting that through their relationship with Pauline, they become hers to take care of as if she has adopted sons rather than taken on a husband or a lover.

Beyond being identified as a mother while her two lovers are identified as sons, she has actual children to care for. Her entire daily routine revolves around her two daughters even though they are on vacation. Munro sets the story on vacation, as vacation should be a space in time where traditional household roles are softened—on vacation, there is no argument for one spouse to be gone all day at work while the other stays home with the children. Moreover, Brian is a schoolteacher, meaning that he is perfectly capable of caring for children as it is his job, yet he puts all the responsibility of the children on Pauline, his wife, in his personal life. It is the first thing she must tend to when she opens her eyes in the morning: “Pauline slides out of bed as soon as she’s awake every morning, slides out of reach of Brian’s long, sleepily searching arms and legs. What wakes her are the first squeaks and mutters of the baby, Mara, in the children’s room, and then the creak of the crib as Mara—sixteen months old now, getting to the end of babyhood—pulls herself up...” (154). Pauline has to slide out of his clutches, out of his arms and legs, signalling his hold, his oppression, on her. His sleepy hold on her represents just how unconscious, and perhaps unintentional, it is for him to suppress her flourishing; it is the seemingly natural consequence of his being a man and Pauline being a woman. As Pauline is rising to care for their children, his sleepiness also exhibits his lack of effort with the children whereas they are her first concern and priority every morning. Pauline’s personal needs are secondary to her children: “Then she is settled into her stroller, with a biscuit and a bottle of apple juice, while Pauline gets into her sundress and sandals, goes to the bathroom, combs out her hair—all as quickly and quietly as possible” (154-5). All of Pauline’s actions are condensed into a single phrase, just one small part of a whole sentence, while efforts to take care of Mara and Caitlin take up the rest of the paragraph. Pauline being unable to take up space in her own story is representative of the way she has put her own life aside for her children. In fact, her

children refer to her as “Paw Paw” (171), short for “Pauline”—a sound very similar to “Pa” which is traditionally a way to address one’s father. Pauline takes such total care of their children that she takes on the role of the mother *and* the father.

As Brian expects all of the childcare responsibilities to fall on Pauline, it is clear that he wants her to fit into a traditional mother role, as modelled by his own mother. In an early passage in the story, Munro describes Brian and his father arguing over a map and seemingly, metaphorically, arguing over what a woman should be:

But there is a map, set up under glass, between the cottages and the beach. You can stand there looking at the map, then looking at what’s in front of you, looking back at the map again, until you get things sorted out. The grandfather and Brian do this every day, usually getting into an argument—though you’d think there would not be much room for disagreement with the map right there. Brian chooses to see the map as inexact. But his father will not hear a word of criticism about any aspect of this place, which was his choice for the holiday. The map, like the accommodation and the weather, is perfect. (153-4)

A map’s function is to be a representation of the terrain to help one navigate. This map is Brian’s mother and acts as a guideline for how Pauline should act as a mother. Notably, it is Brian and his father who argue over the map and the reality of the place, which is representative of how women’s roles are dictated by men. As Brian’s father is older and more traditional, he is inflexible and unwilling to take criticism of the map when Brian points out that the map is inexact. As for the confusion between the map and the beach in real life, it shows that nothing is ever easy to navigate, even with a mapped guideline—motherhood and wifedom are not easy for Pauline to navigate. Then, we are given Brian’s mother’s perspective on the map:

Brian's mother won't look at the map. She says it boggles her mind. The men laugh at her, they accept that her mind is boggled. Her husband believes that this is because she is a female. Brian believes that it's because she's his mother. Her concern is always about whether anybody is hungry yet, or thirsty, whether the children have their sun hats on and have been rubbed with protective lotion. And what is the strange bite on Caitlin's arm that doesn't look like the bite of a mosquito? She makes her husband wear a floppy cotton hat and thinks that Brian should wear one too—she reminds him of how sick he got from the sun, that summer they went to the Okanagan, when he was a child. Sometimes Brian says to her, 'Oh, dry up, Mother.' His tone is mostly affectionate, but his father may ask him if that's the way he can talk to his mother nowadays.

'She doesn't mind,' says Brian.

'How do you know?' says his father.

'Oh for Pete's sake,' says his mother. (154)

Brian's mother does not engage with the map as motherhood comes more naturally to her. She is already fulfilling the role by doting on them both and constantly worrying about everyone's well-being. Although this is both satisfying and annoying to her husband and son, the role is designed to be both. Her husband looks down on her gender and her son allows her to be annoying because that is what he believes mothers should be. The double-edged sword is that she is met with "[o]h, dry up, Mother," when she fulfills the role of being a mother, but her abandonment of this role would not be well received, as Pauline's character arc is an exploration of this carelessness. Brian's mother's behaviour in this passage is what Brian and his parents want

Pauline to be, and they want her to be this way while accepting insults from them. They want her to be in a position of subordination.

On the whole, it seems that there is nothing seriously wrong with Brian or his relationship with Pauline, yet he stifles her. Pauline sets aside her own desires in order to make her children her priority for Brian. When Jeffrey asks her to be a part of the play, Pauline declines saying that she cannot act. It is Brian who pushes her to do it, but the words he uses indicate, perhaps, a lack of awareness when it comes to his desire for her to fulfill her duties as a mother and a wife. He says to Jeffrey, “She’s like a little mule, it’s hard to get her started. No, seriously, she’s too self-effacing, I tell her that all the time” (156). Brian acknowledges that she is self-effacing and pushes her to explore acting in a play, but it is as if he is not aware that she makes these sacrifices for him—because he demands it. Sometimes, she comes up with romantic visions of how her life might be different, “She enjoyed her short walk in the empty streets—she felt as if she had become an urban person, someone detached and solitary, who lived in the glare of an important dream” (159). This urban fantasy vision of Pauline’s is imagined while getting coffee for everyone at rehearsal. It is almost as if in those moments alone, she can imagine that she is pursuing a real career in arts, maybe acting, in a big city without her children, Brian, or Jeffrey. That vision is who she really wants to be.

In keeping with “Orpheus and Eurydice,” Pauline suffers two deaths in “The Children Stay”—the first being her marriage with Brian and the second being her affair with Jeffrey. Being with Brian is “married complicity” (177) and being with Jeffrey is false freedom from married complicity. She may never have been able to flourish with Brian, but she is also unable to flourish with Jeffrey. Somewhat ironically, this brings new meaning to the line in Ovid’s text,

“For what complaint had she save she was loved?” (226). Eurydice had the love and devotion of one man who killed her, and Pauline has two.

That Jeffrey is the cause of Pauline’s second death is signalled as soon as he is introduced in the story. His first line is a joke about how his last name, Toom, is pronounced the same as “tomb”: “Without the B” (155). It is as if this time, she will be entombed instead of lingering in the underworld. Moreover, when Pauline leaves Brian for Jeffrey, she loses all of her possessions: “She had no furniture anymore [...] Even her books, she might have lost. Even her clothes. The skirt and blouse and sandals she had put on for the trip to Campbell River might well be all she had now to her name. She would never go back to lay claim to anything” (174). The loss of her belongings and her inability to go back for anything crystallizes her decision. Like death, she cannot take anything with her and like death, it is permanent—“A sack over her head” (179).

Pauline uses Jeffrey as a way out of her marriage to Brian because she saw extramarital affairs as something grand and romantic before she had gone through with it herself:

What she was doing would be what she had heard about and read about. It was what Anna Karenina had done and what Madame Bovary had wanted to do. It was what a teacher at Brian’s school had done, with the school secretary. He had run off with her. That was what it was called. Running off with. Taking off with. It was spoken of disparagingly, humorously, enviously. (175)

Leaving someone was something she had only read about in books and heard about in whispers. She romanticised the act and ends the thought with how envious she had been of these people who had run off with their lovers. Before she leaves Brian, she tells him that Orpheus kills Eurydice on purpose in Anouilh’s play “[s]o they don’t have to go on with life and get married

and have kids and buy an old house and fix it up and—’ ‘And have affairs,’ said Brian” (167). She thinks that it could be worth dying to avoid a scripted married life. When Brian brings up how they would have affairs, she “dreamily” (167) says, “Everybody has choices” (167). To Pauline, an affair is a dreamy proceeding. As if to avoid the script of being a housewife, she has fallen into another script (one that Brian has predicted) where she has an affair to escape.

Jeffrey is no more than part of her idealized dream of running away with someone as she does not love him. She does not even know him: “There’s a lot she doesn’t know. She hardly knows anything about what he likes to eat or what music he likes to listen to or what roles his mother plays in his life (no doubt a mysterious but important one, like the role of Brian’s parents)” (177). Pauline has not thought through what running away with Jeffrey would really be like. She only wants to get away from being married. Once she has committed the act of running away, she realizes that adulterers were not “lucky because the sex they had [was so incredible that they] got such a yearning for each other’s company at all costs or such a faith that their shared future would be altogether better and different in kind from what they had in the past” (175). She wants to believe that being with Jeffrey will be different from being with Brian: “Different in kind. That was what Pauline must believe now—that there was this major difference in lives or in marriages or unions between people. That some of them had a necessity, a fatefulness, about them that others did not have. Of course she would have said the same thing a year ago [...] Pauline would not have known what she was talking about” (175). From the moment she has run away with Jeffrey, a part of her knows that it will not be any different from being suppressed by her husband. Now, she will be suppressed by her paramour.

Before Pauline has even run away with Jeffrey, however, he provides plenty of evidence that he will be just as, if not more, suffocating as Brian. Upon their first meeting, he asks her if



she would like to be in a play he is thinking of directing, and when she knows of the play and names the playwright, he is “unflatteringly surprised” (156) and “immediately [says] he [doesn’t] know if it would ever work out” (156). It had never crossed his mind that she would know the play and perhaps he had only invited her to be in it to impress her and possess her as his actress. As he decides that her being in the play might not work out as soon as she mentions that she knows the play, he is not looking for someone to play the part well but rather someone who looks up to him as the most knowledgeable person on the part and on the play. Then, he comments on her appearance saying that he would “never put a beautiful girl in that part” (157), and tells her to “stay out of the sun” (157) and that her eyebrows “give [her] a sulky look [...] that’s disturbing” (157). He is already comfortable insulting her and commanding her to stay out of the sun during their first ever interaction. He wants to be in control and in a position to exert power over an actress—a muse. With Jeffrey, Pauline is unable to truly explore the play and her role as he only wants someone to listen to him, constantly referencing her inexperience with acting as if to override any insight she may have.

It is immediately obvious to Pauline that he is immature, however, she does not take this as a sign that he will not make a supportive romantic partner. During their initial conversation, she thinks to herself that “as soon as he started talking to her, in this offhand, dismissive way, never quite meeting her eyes, she suspected that he was younger than he’d like to appear. Now with that flush she was sure of it” (156). Not only is he dismissive of her, he is thoughtless and immature when it comes to her children. When he calls and asks her to go over and she says she cannot because she has her daughter Mara, he replies, “‘Who? Oh. Sorry.’ Then, ‘Couldn’t you bring her along?’” (170). Jeffrey forgets that Pauline has children and seems to have no idea what it means to bring a toddler to an extramarital affair. While he may bring Pauline temporary

relief from Brian through their sexual affair, he is in no position to support her and allow her to flourish as a person should they be in a relationship that includes more than sex. Despite how careless Jeffrey is, Pauline thinks to herself, “Had she made a great mistake with that refusal? With that reminder of how fenced in she was, in what anybody would call her real life?” (170). She is so focused on how restricted she is by her children that she does not seem to care that Jeffrey did not remember who Mara was. She can only focus on the fact that she could not meet Jeffrey.

At first glance, it may seem like Pauline is exploring her sexuality by embarking on an extramarital affair and leaving her husband, however, the driving force of the affair is Jeffrey, not Pauline. At times, Pauline reads like a passive participant of the affair, rather than someone who is taking charge of their life. In fact, he is the one to initiate each sexual encounter: “Jeffrey crossed the room and bolted the door. Every time, this was like a new decision, which he had to make. Until it was done, she wouldn’t look at him” (160). Their affair is entirely in Jeffrey’s hands. He is the one who makes the decision every time. After they have slept together at the Campbell River motel, “she slides out from under Jeffrey’s hand” (177). They have barely begun their relationship, and already, that description of Pauline getting out of bed parallels an earlier line where Pauline “slides out of reach of Brian’s long, sleepily searching arms and legs” (154). Pauline may have left Brian, but she has not left male oppression behind. The affair, however, moves forward: “he had decided that they must stay together, that she would come with him to Washington State, that they would have to drop the play because things would be too difficult for them in Victoria” (176). Again, he is the one making the decisions and she goes along with it. At this, “she was ready to tell him all the reasons why this was not possible, she still thought she was going to tell him that, but her life was coming adrift in that moment. To go back would be

like tying a sack over her head” (176). Pauline does not give much thought to how everything will turn out going forward, only that she cannot go back to Brian.

Jeffrey offers a false freedom for Pauline, and like Eurydice, she escapes one death for another at the hands of her lover. She admits that her first moment of freedom is not running away with Jeffrey, but rather in a quiet moment alone while he is still sleeping: “Now in the early morning looking around at leisure—the first real leisure or freedom she’d had since she came into that room” (174). Being with Jeffrey was never freedom. In the last line of the story, Pauline asserts that the man she ran off with was not Orphée: “No. Never him” (180). As it is the last line, and Munro often uses Joycean epiphanies at the end of her stories, her declaration that it was never Orphée that she ran off with should offer some sort of realization. Earlier, she argues that Eurydice “loves Orphée. She loves him better in a way than he loves her. She loves him better because she’s not such a fool. She loves him like a human person” (166). Despite the fact that it may be easy to read Pauline as Eurydice and her lovers as Orpheus, she insists that Jeffrey was never Orphée because she never loved him like a human person. All Jeffrey was to Pauline was an escape from her life.

Although Pauline leaves both Brian and Jeffrey by the end of the story, she will never truly be free. To escape her suffocating marriage, she had to leave not only all her possessions behind, but her children. “Something is coming now, a truck. But not just a truck—there’s a large bleak fact coming at her. And it has not arrived out of nowhere—it’s been waiting, cruelly nudging at her since she woke up, or even all night. Caitlyn and Mara” (178). In the text, “Caitlyn and Mara” is offset in a new paragraph to emphasize the singular pain it causes her to leave them behind. While she was with Brian, they were her responsibility, but when she leaves, he throws them in her face as revenge. It is not a discussion: “The children stay [...] Pauline. Did

you hear me? [...] All right. You heard me. Remember. The children stay” (178). Brian does not demand for the children to stay with him because he wants to care for them—he demands it to hurt Pauline. He speaks slowly and steadily, telling her to “remember” to rub salt in the wound.

In her essay “‘Oranges *and* apples’: Alice Munro’s undogmatic feminism,” Maria Löschnigg argues that Pauline does not “successfully overcome the restrictions of gender-scripts or happily break out of [an] unhappy marriage” (66) as “the issue of children [...] poses the severest challenge to [her act] of liberation” (66). In fact, Munro’s works “are rarely about the successful emancipation of powerful women [but rather] complex reflections on the part of female characters [...] which urges a questioning of gender norms” (66). A questioning of gender norms is exactly what Munro explores through Pauline, a young woman who finds herself in a marriage that is not fundamentally wrong, but somehow still stifling. She leaves for another man, but it is not the answer. In the end, she is alone, suffering from “acute pain [that] will become chronic” (179) that came with leaving her children. It seems that there is no answer.

### ***Portrait of a Lady on Fire***

As Alice Munro established that being in romantic relationships with men is a less than ideal environment for women—to explore themselves, their sexuality, and art—Céline Sciamma examines womanhood in the absence of men altogether and explores how women can flourish. Her film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is yet another retelling of Ovid’s “Orpheus and Eurydice” and in this version, Eurydice’s two deaths are also illustrated through relationships with men. Héloïse, Sciamma’s Eurydice, has her first metaphorical death by being sent to a convent and her second metaphorical death by marrying a Milanese gentleman she knows nothing of. In between these two deaths, however, Sciamma offers a time and place of true freedom for Héloïse—a

place free of male presence. In this space, she is able to explore womanhood, sexuality, and art. This safe haven is the setting of the film.

As Héloïse is the Eurydice figure, Marianne is the Orpheus figure and this is defined by her freedom and her role as an artist. She paints and is able to explore and practice art because she is free from men. Through painting, she has the ability to make money for herself by painting portraits and teaching classes—this is part of the opening scene of the film as well as her character introduction, signalling the importance of painting as her job. She is not economically tied to men the way Héloïse and her mother (as well as most other women of this time) are. Because of her financial freedom, unlike Héloïse, she does not have to marry. At first, Héloïse's mother had needed her elder sister to marry, but when her sister committed suicide to escape such a fate, it fell to Héloïse. The death of her sister represents the death of Héloïse's post-marriage life—her sister would literally rather die. Héloïse's marriage secures financial security not only for herself, but for her mother as well, as there is no way for either to survive without the income of a man. The importance of the marriage is evident as her mother will have the marriage no matter what, even after her eldest daughter committed suicide. When Héloïse refuses the marriage by refusing to sit for the portrait, she schemes to have it done in secret.

Sciamma uses art to frame and define freedom, and Marianne, an artist, teaches Héloïse how to be free in their time together. Before Héloïse is summoned by her mother to marry the Milanese gentleman, she studies at a convent—a place that upholds patriarchal values and is sterile of sexuality and freedom. The only joy the convent brought her was music, the gift of art. As Héloïse is under the impression that Marianne has been hired to take her for walks, Marianne explains that Héloïse's mother will allow her to go out alone the next day and that she'll "be free" to which Héloïse replies, "Being free is being alone?" (-1:24:17). As Héloïse went from her

family home to a convent, she does not know what it means to be free, having never experienced it. It is at this time, however, after contemplating freedom and what it means to be free, that Héloïse says that she wants to hear music—that she wants to experience art. It seems that subconsciously, she associates freedom with art:

H: “I’ll go to mass.”

M: “To receive Communion?”

H: “I want to hear music.”

M: “Organ music is pretty but bleak.”

H: “It’s all I know.”

M: “You’ve never heard an orchestra?”

H: “No.” (-1:23:41)

Marianne then plays her a bit of Vivaldi’s “Summer” in attempt to convey what an orchestra might sound like. “Summer” then comes back, in the last shot of the film, to signify Héloïse’s memory of her time with Marianne. This time, it is the orchestra—the full bloom of song in the way it is meant to be heard—but by now, Héloïse has already had her second death.

Furthermore, art is not the only thing that Marianne introduces Héloïse to; she also introduces her to sex. In the safe space away from the influence of men, between her two “deaths,” Héloïse is able to explore her sexuality. When Marianne assists Sophie with her abortion, Héloïse asks if it has happened to Marianne and when she says yes, Héloïse presses further and asks if she has known love. Héloïse asks, “What is it like?” (-1:01:24). In this isolated setting, Héloïse feels safe asking this question. After their first kiss, Héloïse runs away and does not appear for dinner because she is afraid. That evening, however, as they become intimate, Héloïse asks, “Do all lovers feel they’re inventing something?” (-37:31). This stands in

great contrast to Pauline's rather clinical sexual encounters with Jeffrey: "Skins, motions, contact, results. Pauline isn't a woman from whom it's difficult to get results. Brian got them. Probably anyone would, who wasn't wildly inept or morally disgusting" (176). Later, she is described as "hard-used between the legs, swollen and stinking" (177). Although it may seem like Pauline is a woman taking charge of her sexuality by having an extramarital affair, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that her sexual liaisons were not sensual like Héloïse and Marianne's. While true intimacy is not required in order for a woman to explore her sexuality, Pauline is "hard-used" by Jeffrey. She goes from Brian "getting results" to Jeffrey "getting results"—nothing has truly changed. With Héloïse and Marianne, it is less about "getting results" but rather a shared experience. The experience is so special that Héloïse feels as if she is inventing something, as if no one else has ever felt what she is feeling.

In contrast to Pauline's relationships with Brian and Jeffrey, Héloïse and Marianne's relationship is one of equality and acceptance and this is illustrated through Sciamma's emphasis on their artistic collaboration. The relationship between Marianne and Héloïse is not that of artist and muse, but that of equal partners who create art together. Hannah Giorgis argues in her article "How *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* Subverts the Artist-Muse Relationship" for *The Atlantic* that Marianne's painting of Héloïse is a collaborative effort between the two women:

When Marianne tells Héloïse mid-pose that she would 'hate to be in her place,' [...] Héloïse is quick to correct her: 'We're in the same place.' In a sentence, Héloïse rejects passivity and puts them on equal footing. Thus begins one of *Portrait*'s most affecting sequences, in which Héloïse echoes Marianne's small observations. Perched on her chair, the subject maintains her gaze on the painter and rattles off a list of idiosyncrasies she's noticed about Marianne: how her face changes when she's upset, the little movements the

artist isn't aware of. 'If you look at me, who do I look at?' Héloïse asks knowingly.

Marianne, once comfortable in her position as the spectator, is shaken by the realization that she is capturing a subject who sees her, too. The painting isn't just a work of Marianne's; it's every bit Héloïse's as well. (Giorgis)

Héloïse's role in this scene as well as in the film is equal to Marianne's. This stands in contrast to the film's predecessor, Ovid's "Orpheus and Eurydice," where the focus of the story is on Orpheus. He is introduced first as poet and his music is so beautiful that every creature in the underworld stops to listen and as a reward for the beauty of his music, his wife is granted a second life. After her second death, he sings many songs that become the next few stories in the *Metamorphoses*, even taking over the role of the narrator. Eurydice is never given a voice. The equality and power balance in their art-making extends to their relationship as lovers, and the romance between the two women offers a solution to Pauline's conundrum: no men.

The subplot of Sophie's abortion exists to emphasize the focus on the experience of cisgender women. The film is focused first and foremost on womanhood, rather than romance. Sophie's abortion is yet another facet of sexuality. The topic of Sophie's unwanted child is introduced when Marianne is kept up at night by her menstrual cramps and Sophie confesses that she has not had her period for three months. The film emphasizes the experiences of women again and again. Through her abortion, Sophie is able to take charge of her body. This is another aspect of womanhood that takes place away from men. Although Héloïse's mother is a woman, Sophie waits until her departure to see to her abortion as she does not actively work against the patriarchy the way Marianne does. She is older and her traditional views are products of the patriarchal society that they live in. Héloïse's mother does not see being without a husband to be a chance at freedom, but rather as a life of desolation without financial security. Without her



husband, she does everything she can to dive back under the protection of a man by marrying off her daughter. Despite one daughter committing suicide and another daughter refusing to be painted for the suitor, both to escape the marriage, she is not in a position to help her daughters without becoming destitute. As she cannot fight the system, she must work within it at the expense of her daughters.

Although Sophie's abortion may not read as flourishing at first glance, her storyline is one that meditates on womanhood. She is learning about sexuality in a space that is safe. This is then reflected in her art-making. Perhaps the most cinematic moment of the film is the shot of Sophie on the bed crying through her abortion (-34:01). A baby plays beside her head on the bed for lack of space and holds her hand and touches her face. The shot includes only Sophie's face, scrunched in pain, and the baby. Although Marianne and Héloïse are present, the closely cropped frame shows Sophie all alone. This underscores that although she has Marianne and Héloïse, she is ultimately alone, which is emphasized when Marianne looks away from the abortion. To demonstrate Sophie's growth as a woman and a person, Sciamma includes two shots of her stitching a floral scene. Once the lady of the house has left and Sophie begins the process of her abortion, the audience is shown a vase full of fresh flowers and Sophie beginning to stitch one of the herbs (-51:20). After the abortion has been completed, the same vase is shown. The flowers have wilted, but Sophie has almost completed her stitching (-23:02). In these two short and wordless shots, Sophie has immortalized the flowers. This is paralleled by Héloïse enlisting Marianne to immortalize the scene of Sophie's abortion by painting it. In this space away from men and Héloïse's mother, the three women have the space to explore sexuality and art.

Sciamma uses art—both the making of art and the experience of art—as a measure of freedom and flourishing in life. As previously mentioned, Héloïse's time in the film is framed by

life at a convent and a marriage to a man she knows nothing about. The time and space of the film is her only chance at freedom, and Sciamma emphasizes this through her inexperience with art. Marianne, on the other hand, is a painter who is already familiar with art and sex as she is free from the obligation of marriage and men. She is free to do what she pleases and be who she pleases. Throughout the film, Marianne introduces Héloïse to these experiences and as Héloïse flourishes, she delves further into art. As Héloïse explores art in her newfound freedom, she not only collaborates with Marianne on her portrait, but begins to influence Marianne as well. Their relationship is not one of student and teacher, but of equals. For example, Héloïse not only urges Marianne to look upon the abortion as it happens, but later insists that Marianne paint the scene of the abortion. She arranges Sophie and herself for Marianne to paint, directing the work. This insistence on recording the abortion emphasizes the importance of this subplot and solidifies the film as more than just a romance between two women—it is a meditation on womanhood itself. Not only does Sciamma depict an abortion, but these women in 18<sup>th</sup> century France depict it too. This emphasis on depiction and art-making leads into 21<sup>st</sup> century issues of representation in media (that is, for the modern audience of this film). Part of the importance of recording such a scene in a painting is to allow viewers of the painting (and the film) to see themselves represented. Earlier, Marianne explains that she is not allowed to study life-drawing with male nudes because she is a woman. The reason was not that nudity was improper, but that it was a measure put in place “to prevent us [women] from doing great art. Without any notion of male anatomy, the major subjects escape us” (-52:35). The implication is that women are not major subjects, that women are not worthy of being painted and immortalized in art, that women are not a part of great art. By having Marianne paint the scene of Sophie’s abortion, Sciamma inverts

this notion and argues that women are in fact worthy of being painted and worthy of being a part of great art.

Sciamma's insistence on women being a part of art is perhaps most telling in her retelling of Ovid. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* transforms "Orpheus and Eurydice" into a story about womanhood when Ovid's version allowed Eurydice no more than a farewell upon her second death. In her version, Héloïse tells Marianne to "turn around" (-9:52). Eurydice has become the agent—not Orpheus. By retelling a classical myth, she inserts herself into the Western canon. Furthermore, this insertion of herself and her work into Ovid takes place within the film as well. On their last day together, Héloïse realizes that Marianne will have memorized the painted portrait so well that she can recreate the image to infinity, but she herself will have nothing of Marianne. At this, Marianne draws herself into a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for Héloïse to keep (-17:31). Although she draws on page 28, it is in Book X of the *Metamorphoses*: the book where "Orpheus and Eurydice" is found. Marianne quite literally adds herself into the *Metamorphoses* and gives herself and Héloïse a voice. She has given the long-silenced Eurydice a voice. Sciamma has shown viewers a world where women can flourish and rewrites the history of men while doing so.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion that women must not engage in romantic relationships with men in these female-centric transformations of Ovid's text is not a claim that there is no place for men, but rather that there is no adequate space for women to explore themselves and art fully when men are present. Eurydice perishes twice without a word of complaint, Pauline escapes her marriage and her affair but ends up with chronic pain over losing her children, and Marianne and Héloïse's fates are somewhat unknown outside of the fact that they never reunite. While these

endings may seem like punishments for these women, they are expressions of frustration or perhaps hopelessness. Yet their power resides in their ambiguity. Hélène Cixous calls for women to put themselves into the text because writing is a “space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (879). These feminist transformations of Ovid are meditations on womanhood, sexuality, and art that subversively reclaim the women’s voices and agency that were silenced in the traditional articulations of the mythology.

## Works Cited

- Carson, Anne. *Men in the Off Hours*. Vintage, 2000.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of Medusa." *Signs*, translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, vol. 1, no. 4, University of Chicago Press, Summer 1976, pp. 875-893.
- Giorgis, Hannah. "How *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* Subverts the Artist-Muse Relationship." *The Atlantic*, 11 December 2019, [theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/12/portrait-lady-fire-complicating-muse/603340](https://theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/12/portrait-lady-fire-complicating-muse/603340). Accessed 3 August 2020.
- Leighton, Angela. "Form's Matter: A Retrospective." *On form: poetry, aestheticism, and the legacy of a word*, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 1-29.
- Löschnigg, Maria. "'Oranges and apples': Alice Munro's undogmatic feminism." *The Cambridge Companion to Alice Munro*, edited by David Staines, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 60-78.
- McCarter, Stephanie and Jia Tolentino. "Roundtable: The Brutality of Ovid: A conversation on sex, violence, and power in the *Metamorphoses*." *Lapham's Quarterly*, 2019.
- Munro, Alice. "The Children Stay." *The Love of a Good Woman*, 1998. Penguin, 2007, pp. 153-180.
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Translated by A.D. Melville, Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*. Directed by Céline Sciamma, Lilies Films, Neon, 2019.
- Solomon, Jon. "Cinematic Signatures of Orpheus and Operatic Evocations." *Illinois Classical Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, University of Illinois Press, Spring 2019, pp. 111-136.
- Sword, Helen. "Orpheus and Eurydice in the Twentieth Century: Lawrence, H.D., and the Poetics of the Turn." *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 35, no. 4, Duke University Press, Winter 1998, pp.407-428.

Uman, Deborah. "Translation, Transformation and Ravishment in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*." *Allegorica*, 2001.