

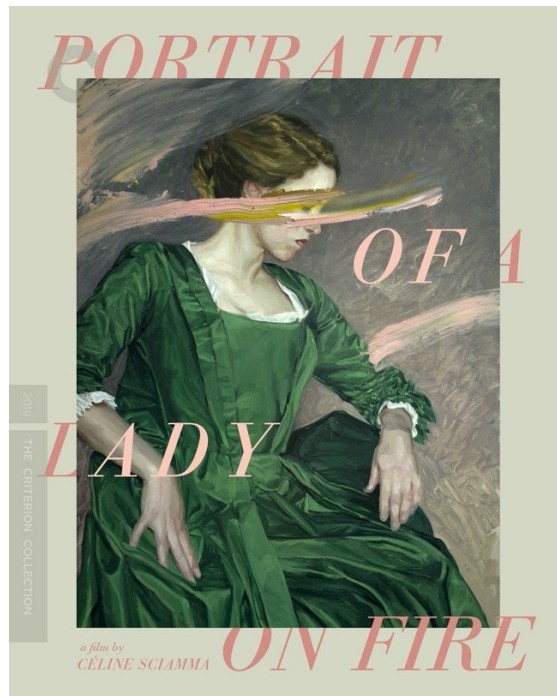
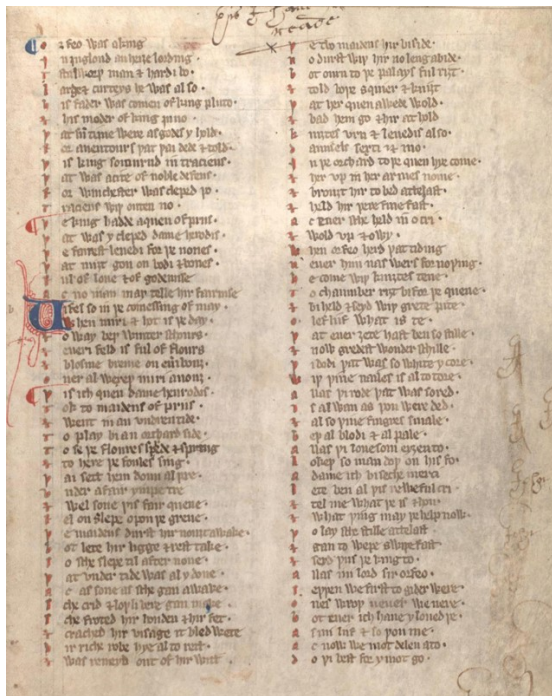
Rachel Linn Shields
Medieval to Modern
Text materials to accompany video

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Hello! I'm Rachel Linn Shields and I'm a Ph.D. student in Medieval literature at St. Louis University where I teach first year composition, literature survey courses, and creative writing. I've previously taught at five other colleges and a prison program as well as in settings ranging from preschools to a marine sanctuary.

Though the Medieval Meets Modern juxtaposition that I'm about to describe is probably most suited to slightly older audiences, like high schoolers or college students (both items are a bit complex), though the connections I'm making between a medieval poem and a modern romance film could be made with many other available texts.

Slide 1:



In this short video, I am placing these two retellings of the story of Orpheus, the medieval romance poem "Sir Orfeo" alongside the 2019 French historical romance film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* to reveal how reading this film alongside the poem helps raise questions about what constitutes a happy ending—and can lead productive classroom discussions about how much our accustomed sense of “happily ever after” is often too simplistic.

- “Sir Orfeo” is available in various places—I’m using the Norton Critical Edition of the *Middle English Romances*. It’s also available online as part of *The Middle English Texts Series* (a.k.a. *TEAMS*).
- *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* is available from the Criterion Collection, which I recommend because of the special features and streaming basically everywhere.

Slide 2:



The image in the slide is a painting of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice created by the painter character in the film and based on the Latin poet Ovid’s version of the story. Orpheus is a musician who travels to the underworld to bring back his dead wife—but he is not allowed to look at her until they’ve reached the world of the living. He does look and she is lost to him forever. Ovid tells us that Orpheus can only bring himself to love young men after the loss of Eurydice and so even in this 2000-year-old version of the story, there are questions about what possibilities “happily ever after” might include. Note that we’re following behind the painter in this film still, like Eurydice herself.

Slide 3:



In *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*), a young female artist in the 18th century travels to Brittany to make a portrait of a young woman (the one in this slide image) to send to her intended husband. The painter and subject fall in love. The film, a queer love story, asks questions about whether it is better to fight to remain together or choose to continue a relationship only within the dimensions of artist representation and memory. The film attempts to recover agency—or at least artistic control—from a narrative otherwise destined to become merely another "doomed romance" and looks for (and, I would argue, finds) some consolation in a realm of art.

During the film, three characters discuss the story of Orpheus and Euridice. One states that there is no good reason for Orpheus to look back, another that he simply couldn't resist because his love was too strong, and the other that the story is about the importance of memory—and that Orpheus has made the choice of a poet rather than a lover. In the film, the two lovers look to the story of Orpheus to find ways they can insert moments of choice and control into their own narrative. This makes the film similar to the medieval poem "Sir Orfeo" that also borrows from this classical story, particularly the way in which the fairies who kidnap the queen in the poem elevate art above other considerations.

Slide 4:



In "Sir Orfeo," a type of medieval story poem called a *Breton lai*, Orfeo's wife does not die, but is taken by fairies who imprison stolen human beings within an often stasis-like enchantment. The fairies agree to return Orfeo's wife as payment for his beautiful music—though they are unsettled by this because he does not visually “match” her (he has been roughing it in the forest). In this version, Orfeo and his wife successfully escape.

However, in the film, the romantic pair makes choices more aligned with those of the fairies. They collaborate on artistic projects and “capture” each other in visual representations and since they both care deeply about art, this is meaningful—this is a happier ending than most. Like the fairies, they choose artistic harmony and memory; they decide to look back, and keep looking back.

The ending of the film helps raise questions about romance as a genre, about who “gets” to have a happy ending and why we think particular endings are happier than others. Medieval *lais* story-poems like “Sir Orfeo” are often retellings of existing stories that reflect the storyteller's “reading” or interpretation of the source material. Even more than a retelling of Ovid, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, set in Brittany, is a modern Breton lai in the tradition of medieval poems like "Sir Orfeo" that explores evolving ideas about love. Comparing them helps us ask similar questions and to develop our our readings and retelling of these stories.

END OF VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

SELECTION from “Sir Orfeo” (to accompany video)

The following selection is from the *TEAMS* text of “Sir Orfeo” edited by Anne Laskaya and Eve Salibury, and runs from lines 387 – 408 of the poem. In this scene, the title character encounters an enchanted fairy castle and finds many abducted humans there. The scene seems horrific from a human perspective, but the fairies are more interested in art than morality and, moreover, many of these humans have been “frozen” at the moment of death or near it. The poem asks this question: *is it better to be kept in a state of stasis, like a portrait or photograph, or to truly die and disappear?* Readers, like the women reading Ovid’s version of the Orpheus and Eurydice story in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, will have differing opinions about this fate based on their own experiences and beliefs.

Than he gan bihold about al,
And seighe liggeand within the wal
Of folk that were thider y-brought
And thought dede, and nare nought.
Sum stode withouten hade,
And sum non arnes nade,
And sum thurth the bodi hadde wounde,
And sum lay wode, y-bounde,
And sum armed on hors sete,
And sum astrangled as thai ete;
And sum were in water adreynt,
And sum with fire al forschreynt.
Wives ther lay on childe bedde,
Sum ded and sum awedde,
And wonder fele ther lay bisides
Right as thai slepe her undertides;
Eche was thus in this warld y-nome,
With fairi thider y-come.
Ther he seighe his owen wiif,
Dame Heurodis, his lef liif,
Slepe under an ympe-tre -
Bi her clothes he knewe that it was he.

CITATIONS & EDITIONS & ADDITIONAL ANALYSIS

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- Naso, P. Ovidius, "Orpheus and Eurydice." *Metamorphoses*, transcribed by Hugo Magnus, translated by Arthur Golding, edited by Brookes More, Cornhill Publishing, 1922, *Perseus*,
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:latinLit:phi0959.phi006.perseus-eng1:10.1-10.85>.
- Portrait of a Lady on Fire* [*Portrait de la jeune fille en feu*]. Directed by Céline Sciamma, The Criterion Collection, 2019.
- Shepard, Steven H.A. *Middle English Romances: Authoritative Texts, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism*. Norton Critical Editions, W.W. Norton & Company, 1995.