

# Panel Proposal: 5611

**Note:** It is best to gather all of the information you will need (name, affiliation, member ID number, etc., of all organizers, presenters, and introducers) **BEFORE** you begin filling out this form. If you navigate away from this page before filling out the required fields (marked with a red asterisk) AND saving your work, **you will lose your work.**

## Title of Panel:

Feminist Re-visionings: Twentieth-Century Women Writers and Classics

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## Organizers:

**First Name:** Jacqueline

**Last Name:** Fabre-Serris

**Member ID Number:** 2270056

**First Name:** Emily

**Last Name:** Hauser

**Member ID Number:** 2758474

This panel explores the often complicated relationship between women writers and Classics in the twentieth century, in a context where the traditional exclusivity of male-dominated literature and scholarship might have held little appeal – and where the perceived male-gendering of the classical canon might have created obstacles to its access. The papers foreground the different kinds (and often lack) of education in Classics afforded to women writers, and how the desire for an access to classical culture affected and influenced their work, asking in what ways their (often fraught) relationship with the classical world—combined with their own interactions with contemporary movements in feminism—impacted their writing. The result is a dialogue between antiquity and the contemporary situations of

these women writers, deployed as a means to better understand their time through an (often militant) feminist perspective. This interplay between eras and cultures allows these women writers to create a voice ‘other’ to their own – which they are then able to take over and reappropriate, inhabiting the roles and voices of both men and women across the ages.

The panel follows a thematic trajectory, moving from a collection of papers (#1–3) studying the explicit feminist “re-visioning” of the classical past by women writers, to presentations (#4–5) which seek to revise judgments made about women writers’ originality in their writing on antiquity, in relationship to their contemporaries. Panelist #1 opens with an exploration of the education of the writer and activist Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999), who experienced both a sense of affinity with and critical distance from classical texts due to her gender. The paper explores how Mitchison drew on this identity as an “amateur insider” to bring the ancient world into her fiction, and to use it as a lens for her feminist convictions. Panelist #2 also considers this conflicted relationship to the classical past with Edith Wharton (1862-1937), who experienced a similar classical education to Mitchison: though she had no access to Latin and Greek, she was fascinated with ancient mythology and classical literature throughout her life. This paper examines how Wharton combined her love of Greek myths and her fascination with the material remains of the past with her analysis of nineteenth-century New York society to challenge—like Mitchison—restrictive and damaging gender ideologies. Panelist #3 then theorizes this “re-visioning” of classical literature as a feminist undertaking, as seen in the works of Mitchison and Wharton, in the writing of Adrienne Rich (1929-2012). Rich’s work on “re-vision” as a feminist strategy stemmed from her education in the white male literary canon—similar to both Mitchison and Wharton—and her awareness of the importance of injecting women back into the literature of the past. This paper continues panelist #1 and #2’s observations to ask what valency classical literature possessed for a feminist poet, exploring how Rich understood looking back

to (and re-visioning) the poetry of antiquity in the context of feminism. Panelist #4 focuses on Laura Riding (1901-1991), seeking to restore her to her rightful place independently of her relationship with Robert Graves, by whom she has often been eclipsed. Riding's own classical credentials are brought to the fore in this paper, and two of her prose works—*A Trojan Ending* and *The Lives of Wives*—are analyzed as works of engaged classical reception, influences on Graves' own work, and feminist explorations of writing and speaking as a woman. Finally, panelist #5 also proposes a reinterpretation of female classical writing with a re-reading of the self-avowed non-feminist, Marguerite Yourcenar (1903-1987). The paper argues that in *Feux* Yourcenar's fiction on Sappho —with whom she shared her gender, profession and sexuality—and her presentation of Sappho's life and poetry in *la Couronne et la Lyre* reveal surprising proximities with feminist activist writers engaged in the radical revision of classical antiquity in early twentieth-century Paris. The panel will end with twenty minutes of discussion, led by the session chair(s).

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**Panel Presenters:**

**First Name:** Sheila

**Last Name:** Murnaghan

**Member ID Number:** 629375

**Title of Paper:**

Inside Stories: Amateurism and Activism in the Classical Works of Naomi Mitchison

**Abstract:**

The Scottish author and activist Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999) was a prolific writer in many genres, including historical fiction and science fiction (of which she is often identified as the first female practitioner), and a committed advocate for socialist, feminist, and anti-colonialist causes. Mitchison's relationship to the classical past – both as the subject of class-reinforcing elite education and as a favored setting for her own fiction – was conditioned by her double position as both insider and

outsider: she was a member of a prosperous and well-connected academic family and a woman acutely aware of the limitations that followed from biological difference. As a child, Mitchison was educated together with her brother at the Dragon school in Oxford, where “I was for all practical purposes a boy until the horrible thing happened”; she reached puberty and was suddenly removed (Mitchison 1975: 11). Subsequently, she had the classical education of a privileged amateur. Her ability to make the most of that situation was evident in her youthful reading of Jowett’s translation of Plato, which she came upon in the family bookshelf: “I picked up and began to read *The Republic* and was much taken up with the idea of being a Guardian. This, I know, started off one of my interminable inside stories, interspersed with noble sayings in the manner of Jowett . . .” (Mitchison 1975: 40). Mitchison’s response to Plato via Jowett was marked at once by a freedom and confidence that came with her comfortable status, which allowed her to inject herself into a male-dominated world (“in my inside stories I don’t suppose I was ever a Greek woman”) and by a critical distance that came with her gender, which detached her from the oppressive conservatism associated with Plato: “Perhaps I only escaped the Platonic net, so widely spread in Oxford, by being one of those inferior creatures of the wrong sex, born, not to be leaders, but perhaps with luck, like Socrates . . . to be a gadfly” (Mitchison 1975:40-41).

Mitchison embarked briefly on university-level studies in science, but turned instead to nursing with the advent of WWI and then to life as a wife, mother, writer, and feminist gadfly, with strongly-held and unconventional views favoring open marriage, sexual freedom, and birth control. As an amateur classicist, she circumvented the censorship and resistance engendered by her contemporary fiction (notably her 1935 novel *We Have Been Warned*) by using ancient settings for novels that both exposed the distorting effects of female disempowerment and entertained the possibilities of female

emancipation and unconventional sexuality. Her imaginative reconstructions of life in antiquity were underwritten by knowledge of ancient history acquired not through scholarship but through personal reading and personal contacts: in her 1925 novel *Cloud Cuckoo-Land*, set during the Peloponnesian War, these influences are reflected in a prefatory note linking some Greek terminology to the works of Jane Ellen Harrison and a provocative dedication “To my lover,” by whom she means the Oxford classicist H.T. Wade-Gery. After surveying Mitchison’s strategic negotiation of the advantages and disadvantages of her formative years, this paper will consider how she drew on her status as a story-telling insider to make fictions of the ancient world into vehicles for uncompromising and far-reaching feminist convictions.

**Length of Presentation:** 20 minutes

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**First Name:** Isobel

**Last Name:** Hurst

**Member ID Number:** 3189449

**Title of Paper:**

Edith Wharton and Classical Antiquity: From Victorian to Modern

**Abstract:**

Edith Wharton’s most notable writing belongs to a period of transition between two eras dominated by classicism, the Victorian period and Modernism. For nineteenth-century women with literary ambitions, authorship and classical education had been closely connected. Writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot reinforced the association between classicism and authority not only in their works but by becoming celebrated for their classical learning, and American women writers like Emily Dickinson, Willa Cather and Edith Wharton also produced literary responses to the classical tradition. In her autobiography, *A Backward*

*Glance*, Wharton laments that as a girl she was 'deprived of the irreplaceable grounding of Greek and Latin', a lack only partially compensated by her awareness that some of her contemporaries finished their classical schooling with little ability to respond to the poetry they had learned by rote. Wharton did not study Latin or Greek at school like Dickinson or university like Cather, but her fiction engages with mythology, ancient history and classical literature. Her references to Demeter and Persephone have been much discussed by critics including Josephine Donovan and Candace Waid, who argues that Wharton identified Persephone as a figure for the woman writer.

Wharton's fiction, although written in the early years of the twentieth century, emulates some aspects of Victorian Hellenism, in particular the use of the novel form for an exploration of the tragic in a contemporary setting. In *The House of Mirth* (1905) she engages with Greek tragedy, mediated by the contemporary theatre, naturalism and Social Darwinism. Edmund Wilson describes Wharton as being 'much haunted by the myth of the Eumenides', and the motif of pursuit by the Furies recurs throughout the text as the heroine is driven out of society. In this novel Wharton also uses myths that women readers who had not studied Latin or Greek would have encountered in texts like Thomas Bulfinch's *The Age of Fable* (1855). She employs the myth of Perseus and Andromeda to explore the dangers of relying on outmoded gender roles and the vulnerability of young women faced with the 'devouring monster Society'.

Wharton's understanding of antiquity also drew on more recent approaches to the ancient world, the scholarship which influenced Modernists such as T. S. Eliot, including J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Like many women of her time who had not had the opportunity to study the classical languages, she was fascinated by archaeology and anthropology. In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), her characters view the 'recovered fragments of Ilium' at the Metropolitan

Museum, and she associates her own attempt to recover 'Old New York' in her fiction with Schliemann's excavation of Troy. She imagines the world of her childhood as a lost civilisation which is to be carefully reconstructed like the relics of antiquity: 'its smallest fragments begin to be worth collecting and putting together before the last of those who knew the live structure are swept away with it' (*A Backward Glance*). This paper will examine how Wharton combines her love of Greek myths and her fascination with the material remains of the past with her analysis of nineteenth-century New York society to challenge restrictive and damaging gender ideologies.

**Length of Presentation:** 20 minutes

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**First Name:** Emily

**Last Name:** Hauser

**Member ID Number:** 2758474

**Title of Paper:**

Re-visioning Classics: Adrienne Rich and the Critique of "Old Texts"

**Abstract:**

In 1971, Adrienne Rich – one of the most influential feminist poets of the twentieth century – wrote the essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* pp. 39–64). It was a powerful call to a re-visioning of the past, and an emphatic statement of the importance of such an endeavour for women: "Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entertaining an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter of cultural history: it is an act of survival" (Charlesworth Gelpi and Gelpi 1993: 167). The project as Rich envisioned it was not only a revisioning of myth, as the later reception of her essay might suggest (Zajko 2007: 401); it was a specifically literary project ("an old *text* from a new critical direction... a radical critique of *literature*" [emphasis

mine]). But which texts was Rich thinking of revisioning? What literature was she thinking of when she suggested its “critique”?

Rich grew up in a household which valued art and literature over the political and social concerns which would later become so central to her activism. Her father, Arnold Rich, collected books, and Rich (who was home-schooled until she was nine) grew up surrounded by Arnold’s poetry collection, which included Tennyson, Keats, Matthew Arnold and William Blake, among others. As she later recalled, her father’s insistence on her education (and poetry in particular) – in spite of the pressure and tiresome repetition – formed her in such a way that she felt she was “a person of the book” (Charlesworth Gelpi and Gelpi 1993: 232). Throughout her reading of poetry was what Charlesworth Gelpi and Gelpi have called a sense of “the burden of history” (285), later described by Rich as the feeling of being “pursued by questions of historical process, of historical responsibility, questions of historical consciousness and ignorance and what these have to do with power. And, as a poet, I would be unfaithful to my own trade if I did not recognise the debt that poetry owes to the historical impulse of oral tradition. Many of the enduring devices of the earliest written poetry were mnemonic in origin” (*Blood, Bread and Poetry* p.137). For Rich, history, poetry, and the ancient origins of poetry fused into a call to action, to reassess what it meant to be “a woman, a feminist, a Jew, a Lesbian” both in the light of history and today.

After surveying Rich’s education and the ways in which she felt her upbringing inducted her into a white, male, patriarchal society and literary canon, this paper will survey Rich’s changing relationship to the past, her growing feminist activism, and the “revisioning” of literature through her classical receptions in poetry. It will assess how and why Rich looked back to the literature of the classical world, and in what ways her education in classical receptions in English poetry



enabled her both to explore and re-vision “the old texts”, in order to bring about a feminist re-visioning of the classical past.

**Length of Presentation:** 20 minutes

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**First Name:** Elena

**Last Name:** Theodorakopoulos

**Member ID Number:** 3188744

**Title of Paper:**

The silencing of Laura Riding

**Abstract:**

Laura (Riding) Jackson was one of the 20th century’s greatest poets, and an influential critic in her time. She wrote extensively on what it means to live and write as a woman. But much of her ground-breaking work is overshadowed by the fact that she lived for some years with Robert Graves, and is thought of by many as the inspiration for his *White Goddess*. Her own challenging writing on herself and her work, and her fierce attacks on Graves and his followers bear out how severely she was affected by the myth created around her person at the expense of her work (see her literary memoir, *The Person I Am*, 2011). The implications for literary history of William Empson’s refusal to acknowledge his debt to Riding in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* have been starkly outlined in a recent article (Jacobs 2015). But Riding’s influence on Graves’s classical work, including his poetry and his novels, as well as *The White Goddess*, continues to be overlooked, and rather dramatically. In a recent collection of essays on Graves (Gibson 2015) Riding is mentioned a number of times, although not one title of her works features in the index. Instead, every mention of Riding from the introduction’s description of her relationship with Graves as ‘theatrical’ and ‘gothic’ to the final suggestion that Graves’s depiction of Claudius’ ‘subservient relationship with Messalina’ mirrors his relationship with Riding, plays out her

popular perception as either 'muse' or 'witch' (see Friedmann 2005, on her obituaries). It is clear that this preoccupation with Riding's role in Graves's life is directly responsible for the unjustifiable lack of attention paid to her own creative work, and especially to the two works of historical prose she produced while living with Graves, *A Trojan Ending* (1937) and *The Lives of Wives* (1939).

Both works engage with ancient sources, and with the idea of history and historical writing, as well as with the idea of writing and speaking as a woman. Riding had a good classical education, excelling in Latin at school and reading Classics at Cornell, and her poetry shows detailed engagement with Greek mythology. *A Trojan Ending* is in many ways a direct, although not acknowledged, precursor of novels such as Christa Wolf's *Kassandra* (1984) and of ideas about 'feminine writing' articulated by feminist critics such as Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. But apart from one illuminating reading (in Hoberman 1997) the novel has received little critical attention in the field of classical reception studies. *The Lives of Wives* has fared even worse, and is almost entirely forgotten. A review by Graham Greene in the *Spectator* in 1939 gives a good flavour of the type of misogyny that work such as Riding's was routinely subjected to at the time: Greene's main criticism is that Riding is too difficult, and he makes a meal of her 'unreadability' which he puts down to her being 'afraid of falsity' in a negative way of describing Riding's well-known focus on truth in language. Ridiculing her fierce commitment to choosing words with care, Greene paints a picture in which Riding 'picks out her adjectives like a prim woman removing the bones from her kipper'. He then dismisses her scholarship by relegating her to schoolgirl status with the remark that 'The shadow of the school certificate falls across the page'. It is now widely recognised that accusing women writers of wilful obscurity and over-intellectualism is a common way to marginalise them (see for instance Russ 2018).

This paper gives a proper account of these two prose works by Riding, both in the context of Graves's historical fiction, which I think is influenced by Riding's methodologies, and in the context of her own classicism and feminism. I hope this will help to restore Riding to her just place in the history of modernism and its approaches to the Classics.

**Length of Presentation:** 20 minutes

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**First Name:** Jacqueline

**Last Name:** Fabre-Serris

**Member ID Number:** 2270056

**Title of Paper:**

Marguerite Yourcenar's Sappho (*Feux, La Couronne et la Lyre*) and Lesbian Paris in the early twentieth century

**Abstract:**

Marguerite Yourcenar, the first woman elected to the French Academy in 1980, was not officially chosen as a representative of her sex. Consider Jean d'Ormesson's reply to her Reception speech: "I will not hide from you, Madam, that it is not because you are a woman that you are here today: it is because you are a great writer". Classical antiquity nourishes the work of Yourcenar, who learned Greek and Latin from private tutors as a child. Critical assessments of 'Yourcenar and antiquity' generally echo the view that she herself defended: namely that she should be judged as a human being, and not as a woman. However, by focusing on what Yourcenar wrote about Sappho in *Feux* (1936) and in *La Couronne et la Lyre* (1979), I have reached a different conclusion. As Dejean (1999) has pointed out, any reading of Sappho challenges the gender identity of the reader, translator or commentator and her or his beliefs on what a woman should be socially and sexually. I seek to show that this is also the case for Yourcenar, who like Sappho was a

woman, an author, and shared Sappho's apparent sexual preferences.

In *Feux*' last text, *Sappho or the suicide*, Yourcenar transferred the story of the ancient poetess to a contemporary setting: her Sappho is a trapeze artist, represented as bisexual. After becoming 'disgusted by the external attributes of virility', she loves beauty in feminine bodies. Once abandoned by her most passionately loved female friend, Attis, Sappho falls in love with a man, Phaon, because she finds in him certain characteristics formerly found desirable in Attis. One day he is dressed up in disguise, wearing a 'peignoir' that had belonged to Attis. Having put an end to the vertigo of gender ambiguity, he suddenly appears to be 'no more than a substitute for the beautiful missing nymph'. Sappho flees in horror at the 'ridicule of having been able to believe that a young man existed' and tries to commit suicide in vain. *Sappho or the suicide* is the text in which Yourcenar most directly alludes to the actual erotic scenario from which her book originates: *Feux* was born from her passion for her editor, André Fraigneau, a homosexual who had rejected her. In her preface to Sappho's translations, in the *Couronne et la Lyre*, Yourcenar points out that 'Sappho's professional situation' is similar to 'that of male poets surrounding themselves with disciples to whom they taught their art', and clearly mentions her own sexual choices when talking about 'love between women'.

I would like to situate Yourcenar's fiction on Sappho, and her presentation of Sappho's life and poetry, in their historical contexts, on the one hand, the debates in German and French academic circles, and, on the other hand, the 'revolution' brought about by Renée Vivien's translation of Sappho's poems (1903). She was a friend of Pierre Louÿs, who was violently attacked by the German classicist Wilamowitz for his *Chansons de Bilitis* (1895). Vivien's edition was widely exploited by Mario Meunier in his first edition of Sappho (1911) before he took the side of Theodore Reinach,

who promoted the German 'chaste Sappho' theory, in his second edition (1932). I would especially like to place Yourcenar's texts in the context of the Sapphic literary community that was formed in Paris from 1900, examining several female authors whom Yourcenar apparently 'ignored', not only Vivien, but her friend, the American Nathalie Barney (*Cinq petits dialogues grecs*, 1902, *Equivoque*, 1910, *Pensées d'une amazone*, 1920) and the 'other great French female author, Colette (*Le pur et l'impur*, 1932).

Bibliographical details sometimes reveal carefully hidden relationships. Vivien, admired by Salomon Reinach, was probably well known by his brother, Theodore. According to Faderman (370), Yourcenar frequented Barney's salon. Unexpected proximities emerge, revealing how Yourcenar's work is typical of the emancipation of social, intellectual and sexual codes experienced in the 'belle époque' and the post-war period in Paris.

**Length of Presentation:** 20 minutes

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**All Participants are in good standing:**

**Joint session?:** No

**General discussion?:** 20 minutes