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Counter-Cultural Strategies in the Fiction of Naomi Mitchison and Caroline Dale Snedeker

This paper will show how two early twentieth-century historical novelists used classical settings to work out challenges to traditional cultural assumptions, especially in relation to the position of women. Naomi Mitchison, born in 1897 to a prominent British academic family, was a leading advocate of progressive social causes and the author of political essays, memoirs, and novels in a variety of genres, including historical fiction set in the classical world. Caroline Dale Snedeker (1871-1956) grew up in New Harmony, Indiana, founded as a utopian community by her great-grandfather Robert Owen. She wrote a series of children's books, many of them set in Greco-Roman antiquity, which clearly reflect her liberal political sympathies. Both deserve to be better known to students of the classical tradition; Mitchison has received some recent critical attention, but Snedeker has gone virtually unnoticed.

Simply by writing novels set in antiquity, Mitchison and Snedeker were expressing a kind of counter-cultural commitment, staking a claim on the classical tradition from which women had traditionally been excluded. But the ancient setting, with its restricted opportunities for women, presented them with the further challenge of imagining roles for their female characters that could resonate with their own experiences and aspirations and those of their modern female readers. In our discussion, we will focus on the contrasting approaches to this challenge -- which may reflect their differing audiences -- taken in two of their novels, Mitchison's Cloud-Cuckoo Land (1925) and Snedeker's The Perilous Seat (1923) both set in fifth-century Greece. Mitchison uses the conditions of ancient Greece to illustrate the toll on women of the unequal arrangements that she was combating even in her own times and projects her own political concerns onto her male hero, Alxenor; Snedeker, in contrast, tends by a variety of strategies to construct more active and inspiring women's roles for her classical female characters.