

Behind the texts² #1

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**Ancient Prisms / New Paradigms :
Sappho and Catullus in Twentieth-Century Poetry**

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Ecole Normale Supérieure (45, rue d'Ulm)

Salle « Histoire » – 17h30

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The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen the ancient Greek poet Sappho and her first Latin translator, Catullus, gaining prime positions in modern literary culture. A vigorous industry of translations and rewritings of their poetry and biographies has driven the intertwined fortune of these two ancient authors. As a prism for modernity, Sappho's and Catullus' reception has shaped a transnational network of poets and intellectuals, helping to define ideas of origins, gender, sexuality and national identities. Through a comparative perspective, this paper considers for the first time the reception of Sappho and Catullus as a literary pair who transmit poetic culture across the world from the twentieth century to the present.

I show that translations and rewritings of Sappho and Catullus articulate modernist poetics of myth and fragmentation, forms of confessionalism and post-modern pastiche through time and space. A sustained transnational poetic discourse employs the ancient pair to expand notions of literary origins and redefine poetry's relationship to human existence. The inquiry focuses on Italian and North American poetry as two central yet understudied hubs of Sappho's and Catullus' modern reception, also linked by a rich mutual intellectual exchange. While the two national traditions maintain individual characteristics, there are significant themes and patterns recurring across the Italian and North American receptions. These include shared imagery, an interest in eros as a life-giving power driving poetic faculties, the identification of Sappho and Catullus as lyric models, and a consequent designation of their poetry either as the first mythopoeic expression of a shared human essence, or as a way into forms of mythic revisionism aimed at questioning heteronormative and patriarchal gender structures. Although it is not possible to exhaust the discussion of Sappho and Catullus as transnational authors of worldwide standing, I hope the dual comparative perspective on their reception may illuminate several uncharted corners of their global constellation.