Of Woman Born  Adrienne Rich.

For the generation of women who came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of the most pressing issues of the feminist movement—child care, abortion, birth control, equal pay for work of equal value—aimed in effect, if not in fact, to undermine the patriarchal institution of motherhood. The admonition to "choose" replaced the categorical imperative to "bear," and it became possible to postpone having children until careers were established, to have children and use available child care facilities or to decide not to have children at all. During this same time, popular feminist literature concentrated on either the "singleness" of the woman—the independent as distinct from the dependent female—or the unity of women in "sisterhood." Now that the sound of the word "woman" is beginning to spark an image of strength and confidence, and the "sisters" have had children and time enough to think about them, we can finally turn to examine the issue of motherhood with refreshed interest and with the insights born of experience.

American poet Adrienne Rich deals with motherhood as both an experience and an institution in Of Woman Born, and sees the two forces struggling in an antagonistic relationship. The book is an essay in definition, an attempt, says Rich, "to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential re-
In the relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. (p. 13) The two spheres of institution and experience, Rich suggests, have generated the correlative emotions of anger and tenderness, the two dominant emotions of motherhood which characterize the mother's ambivalent psychological state. Often, the two spheres move together so discordantly that violence erupts. The anger and desperation of powerlessness, the rage that accumulates with years of resentment, the cutting edge of unrelieved frustration which sometimes even severs the bond between mother and child—all the taboos of motherhood that stand in contradiction to the archetypal sympathetic and giving mother and are broken in secrecy—are seen as part of this galling and violent legacy of patriarchy.

At a general social level, the institution of motherhood is seen as one that bolsters other patriarchal institutions, religious and political. The mother as a bearer of children, especially sons, serves the needs of the men who run her society. In government offices, corporation boardrooms and other places where the business of society is carried out, the institution of motherhood provides both necessary and decorative fittings. In the lower depths, it is responsible for the violence of rape, infanticide and even abortion. ("Abortion is violence: a deep, desperate violence inflicted by a woman upon, first of all, herself." (p. 269) The physical and psychological violence of patriarchy, what Rich calls the "Heart of Maternal Darkness," results from the control of women's bodies by male interests. Even birth control movements have been directed by men, in particular the sterilization of Third World women. The patriarchal system, Rich contends, with its control of "contraception, fertility, obstetrics, gynecology, and extra-uterine reproductive experiments," (p. 34) must be a continual source of potential or actual harm.

Although the book is in large measure a record of the devastating effects of patriarchy on motherhood, its tone is remarkably positive. The emphasis throughout is on women's potential. Rich urges women to experiment with "new ways of living." (p. 282) By forming new relations with their male and female children, their own mothers, other women and themselves, women may alter the institution of motherhood and make more enjoyable the experience of mothering. The most decisive changes, Rich maintains, will follow the "repossession by women of our bodies," (p. 285) a phrase to which Rich's historical account of obstetrical procedures gives considerable clarity. Rich asks women to begin "to think through the body," (p. 285) a
remark that should be read, I believe, with its full resonance of Eliotic
dissociation of sensibility. She is especially perceptive when she writes
of the plight of the intellectual woman whose body has been a trap, a
prison to escape from: "The body has been made so problematic for women
that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disem­
bodied spirit." (p. 40) One recalls the final travels of Doris Lessing's
neutered and ethereal Martha Quest in The Four Gated City. Rich is, as I
understand it, demanding nothing less for woman than physical, emotional and
intellectual integrity.

For all of the book's sound analytical judgments and accurate observations,
it is often disturbing and will no
doubt be received as a controversial work. Rich's reluctance to dictate
to women, to preach a position of one
sort or another, sometimes puts her in
the odd position of having to report
particular views without either en­
dorsing or refuting them. At one
point, for example, she quotes
Suzanne Arms, a woman who objects to
Lamaze breathing drills because they
allow the woman in labour to be "too
involved in . . . control . . . ."(p.
173) Is this doubletalk or an obses­
sive distaste for anything smacking
of an exercise of male restraint?
Rich simply records the comment and
leaves it at that. Regrettably, this
is not an isolated example. Moreover,
Rich is reluctant not only to dictate
to women but also to call for any
legislative reforms which might alter
the institution of motherhood. She
does not care to support state­
controlled day care: "Mass child care
in patriarchy," she argues, "has but
two purposes: to introduce large num­
bers of women into the labour force,
in a developing economy or during a
war, and to indoctrinate future citi­
zens." (p. 14) Perhaps this is so,
but why not urge caution, awareness,
even skepticism, instead? The de­
struction of patriarchy that Rich de­
sires will surely be encouraged by the
introduction of more women into the
labour force, as Rich herself often
comes close to saying, but never does.
If women's work in the nineteenth cen­
tury was, as Rich believes, "clearly
subversive to 'the home' and to patri­
archal marriage,"(p.49)why should it
not be so today? Why not help to
facilitate women's entry into the
labour force? Lastly, if Rich acknow­
ledges that "poverty, malnutrition,
desertion by the father of the child
and inadequate prenatal care" (p.
177) are the conditions attending most
births, why does she not discuss the
high cost of giving birth in the U.S.
or the cost, availability and quality
of gynecological preventive medicine?
In fact, she is far too unwilling to
propose any reform that might change
the state of motherhood under patri­
archy. Surely this is a species of
excessive purism.
Paradoxically, Rich's generous toler­ance of other women's ideas and her refusal to legislate for the women's movement render her narrowly intoler­ant of women who see the future taking a more definite shape. Rich believes that patriarchy, which predates capital­ism, survives under socialism. Accordingly, men abuse women, in Rich's view, not as capitalists or socialists, but as men. Rich offers a running critique of socialist prac­tises in the Soviet Union, China and Cuba where, she concludes, the "double role" of working woman and child nurturer exists. Socialism, she says, may remove economic inequities, but it will leave the patriarchal structure intact. It does not seem to have occurred to Rich that such a con­clusion may be premature.

The most readable and compelling sec­tions of the book are in the second half and deal with midwifery and obstetrics, the relationship of mothers to male and female children and the psychic and physical violence of motherhood. For many women, the absorbing chapters of the book, the ones to be read and re-read, are those that focus on mothers and sons and mothers and daughters. Rich, a mother of three sons, urges women to ask them­selves what kind of sons they want, to separate themselves from their sons and make an independent life and to alter the course of the internaliza­tion of patriarchal values. The chap­

Adrienne Rich has written a much-needeč if contentious book. It is occasional­ly self-indulgent and lacking in co­hesion—excerpts from Rich's journals and personal anecdotes are rather care­lessly mixed with historical and anth­ropological scholarship. Her observa­tions are sometimes curiously blinker­ed: was the problem of the SDS and the Weathermen simply a matter of "their sexual exploitation of women and their inherited theories of patriarchal revo­lution?" (p. 78) Exacting readers will wish for a bibliography in addition to the chapter notes. But, for all of its shortcomings, Of Woman Born is a book we cannot afford to neglect. If mothering is ever to be "freely chosen work," (p. 280) the patriarchal Every­man must be called to his general reck­oning. Of Woman Born will help make that summoning come sooner rather than later. Of Woman Born will not, I
think, ever become the essential book on motherhood; it does not have either the tone or the quality of a definitive work. It is, however, something of a "first," and as such it deserves careful reading and genuine respect.

Wendy Katz
Acadia University


In the Fall 1975 issue of Contemporary Verse Two (Vol. 1, Number 2) a fairly long review appeared of Pat Lowther's third book Milk Stone (Borealis, 1974). Entitled "Between the banal and the beautiful," it is a good example of constructive criticism, laying a deft finger on passages of coy whimsy and applauding with both hands the imaginative power and controlled verbal exuberance of the best work. In the next issue of CV II tributes appeared to the murdered poet as well as a letter from Leona Gom saying that Pat Lowther thought that the review was "the fairest and most perceptive criticism of Milk Stone that she had read." Oxford University Press has now brought out posthumously her last collection, A Stone Diary, a work of no banality and great beauty. One likes to think that good criticism can divert poets from the depths, though finally all have to soar on their own wings.

As both titles suggest, Lowther was fascinated by stone, and one could hazard a guess that one of the myths most fundamental to her work is that of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the only survivors of the Greek flood. Wishing to renew the human race, they were ordered by the goddess Themis to cast behind them the bones of their first ancestor. Heads veiled, they walked across the plain throwing over their shoulders stones torn from the earth. For they were the descendants of Gaea, the earth, and rocks are the bones of the earth. Like these two survivors Lowther is a poet very conscious of destructive forces, but is herself essentially a preserver and renewer. At the core of survival she sees the strength and beauty of stone:

Last week I became aware of details cubes of fool's gold green and blue copper crystal formations fossils shell casts iron roses candied gems...

Do you know how beautiful it is to embrace stone to curve all your body