The Baton [n1]

HANNAH WINTER
Muhlenberg College

When she discovered feminist ideology and her mother's journals, Adrienne Rich began one of the most complicated journeys young women take: forgiving a mother enslaved by the patriarchy.

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Growing up, poet and activist Adrienne Rich had a strained relationship with her mother, Helen Elizabeth Jones, a former concert pianist who gave up her creative career to raise her children. Later in life, Rich advocated for women's rights, responding in part to the dire circumstances of her mother's marriage to her father, Arnold Rich, and uncovering a mother's simultaneous power and lack of power in relation to their children and their own lives. Helen Elizabeth Jones' lack of freedom under her husband, and Adrienne Rich's artistic response to that oppression, demonstrate how motherhood suffers under the patriarchy.

In her poem "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," Rich paints a picture of a woman cast in the shadows of men: "When to her lute Corinna sings / neither words nor music are her own…" (Rich, *Collected Poems,* 119). In this stanza, Rich references Thomas Campion's poem "When to Her Lute Corinna Sings." In Campion's poem, Corinna's song and lyrical prowess are used only to contextualize Campion's own sadness and story. [n2] Campion even goes as far as to say Corinna's music is a dictator of his own moods, writing:

> And as her lute doth live or die,
> Let by her passion, so must I:
> For when of pleasure she doth sing,
> My thoughts enjoy a sudden spring…" (Campion 11)

Even when Corinna is simply singing solo to her own instrument, a man will shape her image into a symbol of his own grief, an objectified emblem for his art. Despite Corinna's proficiency as a lyrical poet in Greek mythology, she is largely criticized, while her male counterparts, some of whom she taught and defeated in poetic duels, are praised. History's perception of Corinna leaves very little room for her own success, matching Rich's description of "words nor music her own…."

Rich relates her mother's own suffering under Arnold Rich to Corinna's stifled voice. The destiny Helen had paved for herself through years of musical practice now took a back seat to Arnold's desires. As Rich wrote in the "Motherhood and Daughterhood," section of her 1976 essay, "Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution":

> My father, brilliant, ambitious, possessed by his own drive, assumed that she would give her life over to the enhancement of his. She would manage his household with the formality and grace becoming of a medical professor's wife… she would "keep up" her music, though there was no question of letting her composing and practice conflict with her duties as a wife and mother… (Rich, "Of Woman Born," 110)

Arnold Rich's expectations, and the shadow of his rule on the Rich household, demanded a prioritization of his wants, needs and expectations for the women around him. Helen was expected to keep

up her music, but only in the way Arnold liked, and only if it didn't "conflict" with her motherly duties. This absolute rule Arnold imposed directly matches Corinna's lack of agency in her own music-making, despite her prowess; Helen could've been a great concert pianist, but now her music is seen as nothing but a hobby that could have potentially roadblocked her mothering abilities.

Rich continues describing Corinna in "Snapshots", once again slyly referencing patriarchal control and her mother: "Adjusted in reflections of an eye… Poised, trembling and unsatisfied, before / an unlocked door, that cage of cages, / tell us, you bird, you tragical machine… Pinned down / by love…" (Rich, *Collected Poems*, 119) Corinna is only seen in the "reflections of an eye," a reference to her role as a muse for male poets rather than a complex artist herself. She is destined to be enjoyed by others rather than claiming her own destiny and making her own music. Rich compares her to a caged bird, the expectations and supposed love of her admirers "pinning down" her wings. This sadness and dissatisfaction resembles Rich's mother, both in Rich's own descriptions and in other biographical pieces about her life. Even as a child, Rich noticed her mother's deep unhappiness, discomfort, and anger in parenting her children. Rich didn't realize that her mother's unhappiness was not a resentment of her, but of the life she had been forced into. Helen wished to be a mother, but perhaps not under Arnold's strict rule. She wished to play the piano, but not under his supervision. She wished to dress modestly, but not in the same dress everyday as Arnold demanded. In the "reflections" of Arnold's eye, Helen was molded into an angry mother, "trembling… unsatisfied…" Like Corinna, her life is a "cage of cages," a prison absent of self agency or choice.

This lack of control her mother experienced was something Rich only began to understand in her adult life, when she began engaging with feminism both intellectually and politically. In "Of Woman Born," Rich writes, "We need to understand the power and powerlessness embodied in motherhood in patriarchal culture…" (Rich, "Of Woman Born," 110). Helen was a looming female figure in Rich's life, her anger and indifference towards her daughter a defining feature in Rich's relationship to herself. Arnold was the one pulling the strings, but young Rich still saw her mother as a model and still desired her love and attention. Of her mother, Rich writes:

> I am sure that she was made to feel responsible for all our imperfections… Under the institution of motherhood, the mother is the first to blame if theory proves unworkable in practice, or if anything whatsoever goes wrong… For years, I felt my mother had chosen my father over me, had sacrificed me to his needs and theories… (Rich, "Of Woman Born," 117)

Helen was not only forced to give up her artistic dreams, but she was urged to abandon her inherent motherly instincts. Arnold, ever the intellectual, wished to raise their children in a sterile, strict manner, and as a dutiful subservient wife, Helen agreed. Rich even describes reading her mother's journaling about Arnold's methods, sensing her battling with her natural desire to nurture her children. As her childrens' homeschool teacher and the enforcer of Arnold's methods, Helen was "the first to blame" when Rich experienced unhappiness in her childhood home. Arnold definitely didn't hesitate to point out where Helen failed him and their children, either. For Helen, the criticism and anger comes from both sides: Her husband, desperate for her perfection, and her children, yearning to be loved. As a child, none of this nuance was visible or comprehensible to Rich, who interpreted her mother as cold and angry. Even years after she moved out of her parents' home, she dreamt of a groundbreaking reconciliation with her mother, writing, "They are unhealed child's fantasies, I think—of some infinitely healing conversation with her, in which we could show all our wounds, transcend the pain we have shared as mother and daughter…" (Rich, "Of Woman Born," 115) The unhealed child inside Rich still craves a motherly figure, still believes in her mother's capacity for care, even when their relationship had been absent of affection for as long as she can remember.

In discovering feminist ideology and her mother's journals, Rich begins one of the most complicated journeys feminists and young women encounter: forgiving a mother enslaved by the patriarchy. In her poem "Solfeggietto," Rich describes the piano lessons her mother gave her, and the effort she made to understand the woman who raised her: "your Steinway grand / came to me as birthright / a black cave / with teeth of ebony and ivory wanging and thundering over the head / Of the crawling child… already knowing the world was black and white…" (Rich, *Collected Poems,* 658). Rich paints the scene of her and her mother's strained relationship through her piano lessons; despite Helen's passion and prowess for music, Rich approaches these

lessons with dread and fear. She describes the keys as "teeth," and the tones of the piano as "thundering," a menacing and monstrous description for a piano. The expectation for her to follow in her mother's virtuosity, to claim what she calls her "birthright," made these lessons feel like a prison. However, Rich is not only talking about her and Helen's relationship, but seemingly their common female experiences, something they can only understand through their anger at each other. Rich describes herself as a "crawling child… already knowing the world was black and white," a reference to the piano keys and perhaps the gender roles she saw portrayed in her own house. Rich finishes the first stanza acknowledging her mother's connection to music, and how she never respected it, writing: "For years we battled over music lessons / mine, taught by you Nor did I wonder / what that keyboard meant to you… Or what it was to teach… a child / counting the minutes and the scales to freedom…" (Rich, 658). Rich's use of the word "over" perhaps illustrates hers and Helen's loud voices rising above the music, canceling out the beauty of her mother's beloved art form. Helen took the time to teach Rich, despite her clear disinterest, wishing to bestow her most valuable wisdom, and Rich now appreciates how debilitating that must have been for her mother. Where Helen might have seen some sort of escape from her domestic duties, feeling for once like a master in her own home, Rich saw the lessons only as something to escape from, "counting the minutes" until they ended.

By the end of "Solfeggietto," Rich distances herself from the frustrated child stuck in those lessons, and really questions her and her mother's roles. She writes: "Freedom: What could that mean, for you or me?... the mother and the daughter / Their doomed exhaustion their common mystery… (Rich, *Collected Poems*, 659-660). Shifting away from her own frustration towards her mother, Rich asks how they can find a mutual avenue of freedom, a clear reference to her feminism and her newfound understanding of her mother's pain. Instead of seeing her mother as a powerful villain choosing to torture her with a pastime she doesn't care about, Rich relates to Helen over their shared "exhaustion" and "mystery." This diction seems to refer to life in Rich's childhood home under Arnold, as well as the tireless expectations placed upon women societally. Rich then explains the true essence of her and her mother's differences, and perhaps the difference between newly-radicalized young feminists and their mothers, writing: "The daughter struggles with the strange notations…but would rather learn by ear and heart The mother / says she must learn to read by sight not ear and heart…" (Rich, *Collected Poems,* 660-661). Rich struggles to read the "notation" her mother puts before her, a direct point to the piano lessons, but also perhaps Helen bestowing wisdom upon her daughter. Rich, ever the impractical, sensitive artist, wants to learn music, or go through life, with her ears and heart open and her eyes shut. Helen, a woman who had to give up her artistic dreams and self determination for societal stability, did not have that option and doesn't think anyone ever will. Life, from what she has observed, happens to someone; one cannot lead with their ears and heart, especially as a woman.

This idea connects to Rich's own feminist ideology about motherhood. She writes:

> I think that it is perhaps that tendency that we have to try to correct the mythologies that deny the strengths and the powers that women have passed onto women, that mothers have passed onto daughters… For it was too simple, early in the new 20th century wave of feminism, for us to analyze our mothers' oppression, to understand… why our mothers did not teach us to be Amazons, why they bound our feet or simply left us… (Rich, 110).

Rich conceptualizes that perhaps early iterations of feminism failed to understand and sympathize with motherly figures, seeing them as a source of trauma and rigid femininity rather than an early sign of oppression towards women. When mothers have caused us pain, or have somehow "bound our feet" instead of led our liberation, it is easy to forget that they are not the evil behind the patriarchy; they are victims too, sometimes in more drastic ways than young feminists can understand. Even in their bondage, mothers try to teach what they can, and Helen's relationship with Rich through music was no exception.

Despite the strain that riddled Helen and Rich's relationship, they are able to reconcile before Helen's passing. After her husband's death, Helen invests further in herself and her music, and she bonds with Rich's children as an attentive grandmother. She and Rich bond over being artists, now free and aware of their mutual anger and oppression. Early on, Helen deeply disapproved of Rich's artistic endeavors, but in later adulthood, they met on common ground as enlightened female artists. Rich's life and work feels like almost a

direct response to her mother's bondage, and a bold attempt to break open the cage that wives and mothers still are trapped in today.

Epilogue

[18] Helen Jones (Sorry Mother) (2024)
By Hannah Winter [n3]

You were an artist
Forced to be a muse
That's a mother's compromise
Shrank yourself down
Until your whole world
Was beholden in his eyes

And now I see
All of your anger
I refused to understand

That you weren't
Selfish or unloving
You were being smothered by a man

Mom, I'm sorry
Under father's looming shadow
All your music sounded wrong

I protested all of your piano lessons
Now I'll
always sing your song

Cage of cages
Under father's thumb
No wonder you were cold
Now I notice
How alike we really are
Something I was never told

And now I see
All you anger
All those feelings that we share

You wanted free
Of father's expectations
And to me that seems quite fair

Mom, I'm sorry
I thought your disappointment
Was at me, without a clue

But it really
Was your dying dream in me
Now I'll sing something for you

You inflected all my imperfections
Did the best that you could do

And we ended
Loved and independent, maybe
All of your dreams came true

Notes

[n1] My title is drawn from Katie Gavin's 2024 song, "The Baton," which is about a mother passing a baton to her daughter, metaphorically illustrating the healing of intergenerational trauma. See the lyrics at Genius: https://genius.com/Katie-gavin-the-baton-lyrics

[n2] For more about Corinna, see "Corinna." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 8 October 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corinna.

[n3] As part of my final project for my CUE, I wrote the song "Helen Jones (Sorry Mother)," inspired by Adrienne Rich's relationship with her mother.

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