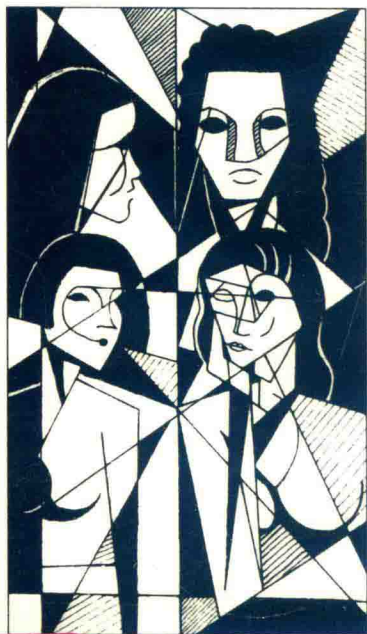


WOMEN OF IDEAS

Adrienne Rich

Passion, Politics
and the Body



by Liz Yorke

图书馆

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WOMEN OF IDEAS

ADRIENNE RICH

Passion, Politics and the Body

Liz Yorke



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ADRIENNE RICH

WOMEN OF IDEAS

Series Editor: Liz Stanley

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This series consists of short study guides designed to introduce readers to the life, times and work of key women of ideas. The emphasis is very much on the ideas of these women and the political and intellectual circumstances in which their work has been formulated and presented.

The women featured are both contemporary and historical thinkers from a range of disciplines including sociology, economics, psychoanalysis, philosophy, anthropology, history and politics. The series aims to: provide succinct introductions to the ideas of women who have been recognised as major theorists; make the work of major women of ideas accessible to students as well as to the general reader; and appraise and reappraise the work of neglected women of ideas and give them a wider profile.

Each book provides a full bibliography of its subject's writings (where they are easily available) so that readers can continue their study using primary sources.

Books in the series include:

Eleanor Rathbone

Johanna Alberti

Simone de Beauvoir

Mary Evans

Christine Delphy

Stevi Jackson

Adrienne Rich

Liz Yorke

For Cynthia, who brings
such joy into my life

Preface

This series introduces readers to the life, times and work of key 'women of ideas' whose work has influenced people and helped change the times in which they lived. Some people might claim that there are few significant women thinkers. However, a litany of the women whose work is discussed in the first titles to be published gives the lie to this: Simone de Beauvoir, Zora Neale Hurston, Simone Weil, Olive Schreiner, Hannah Arendt, Eleanor Rathbone, Christine Delphy, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, to be followed by Rosa Luxemburg, Melanie Klein, Mary Wollstonecraft, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, Margaret Mead, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, Alexandra Kollontai, and others of a similar stature.

Every reader will want to add their own women of ideas to this list – which proves the point. There *are* major bodies of ideas and theories which women have originated; there *are* significant women thinkers; *but* women's intellectual work, like women's other work, is not taken so seriously nor evaluated so highly as men's. It may be men's perceptions of originality and importance which have shaped the definition and evaluation of women's work, but this does not constitute (nor is there any reason to regard it as) a definitive or universal standard. *Women of Ideas* exists to help change such perceptions, by taking women's past and present production of ideas seriously, and by introducing them to a wide new audience. *Women of Ideas* titles include women whose work is well known from both the past and the present, and also those unfamiliar to modern readers although renowned among their contemporaries. The aim is to make their work accessible by drawing out of what is a frequently diverse and complex body of writing the central ideas and key themes, not least by locating these in relation to the intellectual, political and personal milieux in which this work originated.

Do women of ideas have 'another voice', one distinctive and different from that of men of ideas? or is this an essentialist claim and are ideas at basis unsexed? Certainly women's ideas are differently positioned with regard to their perception and evaluation. It is still a case of women having to be twice as good to be seen as half as good as men, for the apparatus of knowledge/power is configured in ways which do not readily accord women and their work the same status as that of men. However, this does not necessarily mean either that the ideas produced by women are significantly different in kind or, even if they presently are, that this is anything other than the product of the workings of social systems which systematically differentiate between the sexes, with such differences disappearing in an equal and just society. *Women of Ideas* is, among other things, a means of standing back and taking the longer view on such questions, with the series as a whole constituting one of the means of evaluating the 'difference debates', as its authors explore the contributions made by the particular women of ideas that individual titles focus upon.

Popularly, ideas are treated as the product of 'genius', of individual minds inventing what is startlingly original – and absolutely unique to them. However, within feminist thought a different approach is taken, seeing ideas as social products rather than uniquely individual ones, as collective thoughts albeit uttered in the distinctive voices of particular individuals. Here there is a recognition that ideas have a 'historical moment' when they assume their greatest significance – and that 'significance' is neither transhistorical nor transnational, but is, rather, temporally and culturally specific, so that the 'great ideas' of one time and place can seem commonplace or ridiculous in others. Here too the cyclical and social nature of the life of ideas is recognised, in which 'new' ideas may in fact be 'old' ones in up-to-date language and expression. And, perhaps most importantly for the *Women of Ideas* series, there is also a recognition of the frequently *gendered* basis of the judgements of the 'significance' and 'importance' of ideas and bodies of work.

The title of the series is taken from Dale Spender's (1982) *Women of Ideas, and What Men have Done to Them*. 'What men have done to them' is shorthand for a complex process in which bodies of ideas 'vanish', not so much by being deliberately suppressed (although this has happened) as by being trivialised, misrepresented, excluded from the canon of what is deemed good, significant, great. In addition to these gatekeeping processes, there are other broader factors at work. Times change, intellectual fashion changes also. One product of this is the often very different interpretation and understanding of bodies of ideas over time: when looked at from different – unsympathetic – viewpoints, then dramatic shifts in the representation of these can occur. Such shifts in intellectual fashion sometimes occur in their own right, while at other times they are related

to wider social, economic and political changes in the world. Wars, the expansion and then contraction of colonialism, revolutions, all have had an effect on what people think, how ideas are interpreted and related to, which ideas are seen as important and which outmoded.

'Women of ideas' of course need not necessarily position themselves as feminists nor prioritise concern with gender. The terms 'feminist' and 'woman' are by no means to be collapsed, but they are not to be treated as binaries either. Some major female thinkers focus on the human condition in order to rethink the nature of reality and thus of 'knowledge'. In doing so they also reposition the nature of ideas. Each of the women featured has produced ideas towards that greater whole which is a more comprehensive rethinking of the nature of knowledge. These women have produced ideas which form bodies of systematic thought, as they have pursued trains of thought over the course of their individual lives. This is not to suggest that such ideas give expression to a 'universal essence' in the way Plato proposed. It is instead to reject rigidly dividing 'realist' from 'idealist' from 'materialist', recognising that aspects of these supposedly categorical distinctions can be brought together to illuminate the extraordinarily complex and fascinating process by which ideas are produced and reproduced in particular intellectual, cultural and historical contexts.

The *Women of Ideas* series is, then, concerned with the 'history of ideas'. It recognises the importance of the 'particular voice' as well as the shared context; it insists on the relevance of the thinker as well as that which is thought. It is concerned with individuals in their relation to wider collectivities and contexts, and it focuses upon the role of particular women of ideas without 'personifying' or individualising the processes by which ideas are shaped, produced, changed. It emphasises that there is a history of '*mentalités collectives*', recognising the continuum between the everyday and the elite, between 'commonsense' and 'high theory'. Ideas have most meaning in their use, in the way they influence other minds and wider social processes, something which occurs by challenging and changing patterns of understanding. As well as looking at the impact of particular women of ideas, the series brings their work to a wider audience, to encourage a greater understanding of the contribution of these women to the way that we *do* think – and also the way that we perhaps *should* think – about knowledge and the human condition.

Liz Stanley

Acknowledgements

At times I was far from sure this book would ever get written. As a counsellor in higher education I am no longer continually nourished by the energy and ideas of an academic community. I miss this greatly, and so am grateful indeed for the help and support of Professor Sandra Harris of Nottingham Trent University. She organised a grant from the CRICC to pay the Counselling Service to release me to work on the book. She fought for me so that I could continue to write. I am also grateful to Liz Stanley for being so delighted when, after she had given up hope, I contacted her with the news that the book was again on its way. Her keen editorial eye shaped and guided this text at key moments. The support of Margaret Beetham and Diana Kealey, both dear and precious friends, continues to sustain me. Philippa Berry also lovingly validated my work at a time when it was hard to believe that my academic life could continue. The English Department at Trent, especially Liz Morrish, Sue Thomas, Tracey Skelton and Greg Woods, have each in their own way helped this book along, and generously offered encouragement, friendship and professional support. My fellow counsellors, especially Ivis Kennington, Marion Bennett, Billie Riley, Penny Hayman and William Hallidie Smith, in their different ways, also enabled this book to happen. The Sage editorial team encouraged the book through its various stages in a most professional and caring way.

Finally, I want to thank Adrienne Rich herself, for the time, energy and care she gave to reading and commenting on the manuscript, for checking my wilder thoughts and for filling gaps in my knowledge. In upholding against all the odds her desire for justice, and through the inspirational visionary wisdom of her thought, she has won worldwide respect. I consider myself especially privileged to have had the opportunity to read and to write about her work, and to have her letters and comments during the process of writing this book.

Abbreviations

- ADW Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988–1991*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1991.
- ARP Barbara Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (eds), *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews and Criticism*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1993. First published in 1975.
- AWP Adrienne Rich, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978–1981*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1981.
- BBP Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985*. London: Virago, 1987.
- CEP Adrienne Rich, *Collected Early Poems 1950–1970*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1993.
- DCL Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1978.
- DFR Adrienne Rich, *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991–1995*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1995.
- FDF Adrienne Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950–84*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1984.
- LSS Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978*. London: Virago, 1980.
- OWB Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1986. First published in 1976.
- PSN Adrienne Rich, *Poems: Selected and New 1950–1974*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1975.
- RAR Jane Roberta Cooper, *Reading Adrienne Rich: Reviews and Re-Visions, 1951–81*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984.

- TP* Adrienne Rich, *Time's Power: Poems 1985–1988*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1989.
- WIFT* Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1993.
- YNL* Adrienne Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1986.
- YRG* bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Turnaround, 1991.

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Introduction

In this short book, I have the task of introducing readers to the complex work of an internationally recognised American poet and theorist, Adrienne Rich. My aim is to explore and to make more accessible some of the ideas that have informed her writings in prose and in poetry over the last four decades. As I write in 1996, Rich is 67 and still writing – even more powerfully and ever more insightfully. I cannot hope to address the entire span of her thought in these few pages, but the more limited project, of indicating to readers what I have found fascinating in thinking about and teaching her work, is perhaps sufficient to this day.

Few women writers have had such a wide impact on contemporary feminist thought as Adrienne Rich. Her essays, emerging from within the global ferment of feminist activity, include controversial contributions to feminist theory, provocative definitions of lesbian identity, and vigorous challenges to the various institutions in and through which women have been controlled: patriarchal motherhood; the economic exploitation of corporate capitalism; the nuclear family; compulsory heterosexuality. These challenges, including her early call for women's personal and collective *experience* to become more central to the educational institution, remain contentious within academia. More recently and for very different (theoretical) reasons, a focus on women's 'experience' has been questioned within feminism also. However, it seems to me that to make women's experience an integral part of the curriculum both

inside and outside Women's Studies, and to base our politics within the material and spiritual urgencies of women's lives, remains profoundly revolutionary. I would still use her essay 'Towards a Woman-Centered University' (1973-74), to introduce students to the 'outrageous', 'improbable' idea of an alternative to the 'man-centred university', that bastion of 'masculine privilege' that has dominated our education system since the Renaissance (LSS: 126-7). I would do so, however, in the full awareness that the Rich writing in 1996 may not be in agreement with the Rich writing in 1974. Her work continuously evolves – revolves, re-visions, re-presents itself in different terms – and is newly weighed and reassessed with each fresh twist of feminist theorising. I have found that each generation of students has been inspired anew with the desire to use their education as a key to social change: as Rich says, 'not merely for changing institutions but for human redefinition; not merely for equal rights but for a new kind of being' (LSS: 155). This still seems a valid enterprise to me.

Rich is a major poet: more than 15 books of poetry to date have been written over a period of 40 years. Her poetry and her prose have brought Rich high praise, a vast range of critical evaluation, and a reputation that has spread far beyond the shores of North America: indeed her work has now been translated into many languages; German, Spanish, Swedish, Dutch, Hebrew, Greek, Italian and Japanese. The jacket of her latest prose work *What is Found There* lists the following prizes, awards and fellowships: two Guggenheim Fellowships, the Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets, the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Lenore Marshall/*Nation* Prize for Poetry, the Fund for Human Dignity Award of the National Gay Task Force, the Common Wealth Award in Literature, the Lambda Book Award, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Poetry, the National Book Award, the Frost Silver Medal of the Poetry Society of America, the Elmer Jones Bobst Award of New York University, and the Poet's Prize. This is far from an exhaustive list – I have not itemised many of the awards from the sixties – and the publication of each new book adds to the honours now heaped on this once severely chastised young poet. Nadine Gordimer, not inappropriately, sees Rich's radical vision as comparable to the wisdom and philosophy of William Blake: 'In her vision

of warning and her celebration of life, Adrienne Rich is the Blake of American letters'.¹ Perhaps predictably, mainstream American literary establishments have been reluctant to claim her, their responses ranging from extreme hostility to mere ambivalence – just as Rich herself is ambivalent about the honours they have now heaped upon her – but feminist voices have upheld her 'prophetic intelligence' as a radical vision which cannot be ignored.² It is throughout the women's movement worldwide that she is most renowned and, whether eulogised or chastised, her voice weaves itself in and through many of the multiform writings and diverse strands of feminist thought. It is rare to open a feminist book without seeing her words quoted somewhere!

Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on 16 May, 1929, on the verge of the Great Depression, 'in my father's workplace, a hospital in the Black ghetto, whose lobby contained an immense white marble statue of Christ' (*BBP*: 101). Baltimore was then a city segregating white from Black, and upheld Christian culture over that of all other religious groups. Her father, Arnold Rich, was at the time teaching and researching in the Department of Pathology at the Johns Hopkins Medical School, and was later made professor of pathology. A Jew, 'from Birmingham, Alabama, his father, Samuel, was Ashkenazic, an immigrant from Austria-Hungary and his mother, Hattie Rice, a Sephardic Jew from Vicksburg, Mississippi' (*BBP*: 101). As a Jew, Arnold Rich grew up in a white southern Protestant-Christian dominated world. Recognisably Jewish, he married a woman from a white southern Protestant family. Her mother Helen and her maternal grandmother Mary Gravely were, Rich tells us, both 'frustrated artists and intellectuals, a lost writer and a lost composer between them' (*BBP*: 102). Before her marriage to Arnold, Helen had trained seriously to be a concert pianist and had won a scholarship to study at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore. Once married, she gave up the pursuit of a concert career and, though she continued composing, this was not allowed to conflict with her duties as wife and mother – not to Arnold's much desired son, but to two daughters.

The social world of Rich's childhood was southern, genteel, middle-class, white and Christian. Both the school and the church attended by Rich were Episcopalian and, 'though without belief',