

FOOD, CONSUMPTION
AND THE BODY IN
CONTEMPORARY
WOMEN'S FICTION

SARAH SCEATS



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Introduction

Eating is a fundamental activity. It is more or less the first thing we do, the primary source of pleasure and frustration, the arena of our earliest education and enculturation. Food is our centre, necessary for survival and inextricably connected with social function. What people eat, how and with whom, what they feel about food and why – even who they eat – are of crucial significance to an understanding of human society. The major significances of eating, however, are not biological but symbolic. According to psychoanalytic theory, formative feeding experiences are inscribed in the psyche; food and eating are essential to self-identity and are instrumental in the definition of family, class, ethnicity. These are not vague associations, for eating practices are highly specific: encoded in appetite, taste, ritual and ingestive etiquettes are unwritten rules and meanings, through which people communicate and are categorised within particular cultural contexts. The essential and necessary qualities of eating invest its surrounding activities with value, whether psychological, moral or affective.

The central role and multiple significances of food and eating entail a link with epistemological and ontological concerns. The prevalence of eating disorders in western culture indicates at least an insecurity about embodiment, the nature of being and the boundaries between the self and the world. Physical boundaries are clearly crucial to food and eating activities as substances pass into, and out of, the body. Uneaten food is ‘other’, part of the world outside, but its status changes as it is taken in to the mouth, is chewed, swallowed, digested. At what point does it become part of us? How do we locate activities such as tasting and regurgitation, and liminal substances such as spit and vomit? We live in a state of uncertainty about how much the self is influenced, changed, nourished or poisoned by what is taken in of the world, the extent to which people are defined by what they eat, or are affected by whoever provides their food. These questions are gendered, for both bodily and ego boundaries are

subject to varieties of influence and pressure, from the internalised patterns of tradition and custom to the physical disruptions of puberty and old age.

In interpersonal and social arenas, too, an enormous amount of uncertainty centres around food. Eating is an act of absolute trust, for how can we know what is in the food we are given? We cannot even be sure of the qualities of the food we provide, especially in the modern world of additives and modification. What food and its surrounding activities signify socially is equally problematic. The symbolic significances of specific foods and eating rituals in particular circumstances are established by various traditions and rituals, but even so, since these are often largely 'understood' rather than articulated, there is scope for error and confusion. As a means of exchange, whether prescribed or informal, eating and drinking may be saturated with meanings that are not at all necessarily apparent.

Women write about food and eating. Why should this be so? Women's bodies have the capacity to manufacture food for their infants which categorises them as feeders, and in western culture women have traditionally borne most of the burden of cooking for and nourishing others, with all that this implies of power and service. The caring, providing roles and their malign counterparts certainly contribute much mimetic content to women's writing. But women eat as well as cook, starve as well as serve, and contemporary fiction is as much concerned with women's appetites as their nurturing capacities. Some psychoanalytic theories suggest that because of girls' long period of attachment to the maternal figure, women have compelling boundary concerns as eaters. Cultural pressures in recent years have certainly made women particularly conscious of their body boundaries in relation to food and eating (or not eating). As this book illustrates, though, women's writing manifests far more diverse areas of engagement than such basic explanations suggest, ranging from explorations of female culinary sensuousness, creativity and authority in cooking, to the exercise of power or political responsibility through food and acts of eating, to the revisiting of earlier depictions of women's sexuality through appetite and eating, from Genesis onwards.

Although the specifics of food and eating are clearly defined by their cultural context, there is a temptation, especially in the light of psychoanalytic theories, to consider the functions of food as essential to all human beings and therefore somehow 'universal' or outside of cultural difference. Contemporary women's writing does not, in general, do this;

indeed it demonstrates both historical and cultural influences. When, in *The Sadeian Woman*, Angela Carter writes, 'flesh comes to us out of history; so does the repression and taboo that governs our experience of flesh' [*sic*], her referent is sexuality, but her remarks are equally relevant to food.¹ The significances of food and eating, like those of sexuality, are psychologically, socially and politically constructed, and symbolisms, customs and behaviours are indicators and results of cultural conditioning. An obvious if paradoxical contemporary example is bingeing and self-starvation, which occur in a cultural context of rampant consumerism in which consumption (literal or metaphorical) is promoted as wholly desirable, while overweight women are stigmatised and often portrayed as joke figures, as coarse, stupid or sexually promiscuous.² Even where eating practices are less obviously culture-specific, however, it is still only possible to consider their general political significance in relation to specific historical and cultural contexts.

The writers considered in this volume have in part been selected precisely because of their evident concern with contemporary history, society and politics (in its broadest sense), especially women's roles and experience. This interest manifests itself very differently in each writer, both formally and in terms of philosophical or political emphases and how these are coded through food, appetite, eating and female bodies. The major focus of attention is on Doris Lessing, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood, and to a lesser extent Michèle Roberts and Alice Thomas Ellis, all of whose writing of food and eating is inextricably linked to explorations of what it means to be a woman in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Doris Lessing confronts the matter of twentieth-century life over an extended period, most obviously in her realist novels such as the 'Children of Violence' sequence or *The Golden Notebook*. Lessing's scope is comprehensive, and food and eating in her writing act as central vehicles for the expression and working through of problems and questions of value. Her novels (realist and fabular alike) are solidly grounded in contemporary history and culture, highlighting, among other things, the difficulties of establishing self-identity and meaning in the modern world, the dangers of excessive mentalism and concomitant importance of psycho-physical integration and, most importantly, how individuals relate to the greater social body. These questions and other issues are explored in close relation to female bodies, food and its associated activities.

Angela Carter is, typically, more perversely ambitious:

I would like, I would really like, to have had the guts and the energy and so on to be able to write about, you know, people having battles with the DHSS. But I haven't. I've done other things. I mean I'm an arty person. OK, I write over-blown purple, self-indulgent prose. So fucking what!³

Carter's fiction is not social realism, notwithstanding its 'entertaining surface' of characterisation, physical detail and the prevalence of food, eating and desire.⁴ Her writing is nevertheless political, as her non-fiction with its sardonic voice and iconoclastic tendency makes quite clear. Styling herself 'the pure product of an advanced, industrialised, post-imperialist country in decline', Carter does not seek to distance herself from the world she anatomises; while she deconstructs the models and conventions by which we live, she recognises their potency and the complexities of human involvement.⁵ Fiction is part of that involvement; Carter insists that the novel is part of 'social practice' and this is evident in her detailed, dramatic and often outlandish fictional exploration of issues surrounding power, sexuality and the construction of gender. The play of appetites is a constant in her complicated representations of power and desire and the challenging of the *status quo*; not surprisingly, perhaps, her writing of food and eating is acutely self-aware and often ironised.

Margaret Atwood's political and artistic position is not dissimilar: 'For me, it's axiomatic that art has its roots in social realities.'⁶ Food, eating and hunger feature substantially and in detail in Atwood's fiction, both as part of the 'social realities' with which her characters must contend, and as a series of compelling metaphors and symbols that run right through her work, and through which she focuses major issues. Though her novels are often taken to be realist, with their central, psychologically and socially convincing focus on women, Atwood incorporates elements of genre fiction (Gothic, thriller, fairy tale, historical romance) that connect with her extensive symbolic use of food and eating to highlight themes such as the commodification of women, the duplicity of sexual predation or the negative power of the victim. Atwood's writing confronts a number of pressing issues in this way, but food and eating are especially used in relation to the politics of oppression and individual freedom and responsibility.

Two further writers in whose work food and eating assume a large importance are Michèle Roberts and Alice Thomas Ellis. Michèle Roberts tends to address contemporary issues obliquely or historically, but always with a strong focus on women's lives and experience. She is much concerned with ontological anxiety and the relation of this to both

gender and religion, but located in a highly material context, and her novels combine an acute sense of physical being with explorations of the historical and cultural definition and regulation of femininity. Food and eating suffuse the novels. Poetic and often lyrical, her writing is both deeply sensuous and perspicacious; characters are often literally hungry, but also psychologically, affectively, spiritually.

Alice Thomas Ellis's writing gives a good deal of attention to the functions and pleasures of food, most specifically to the secular role and power of the cook. Like Roberts, Ellis has a Catholic background, but she is less ambivalent about it; Ellis's fiction suggests a desire to face away from contemporary society and towards spiritual or religious contemplation. Her characters are nevertheless *in* and *of* the contemporary world, grappling with what Ellis represents as its baseness and folly. They are often frankly contemptuous of 'fashionable' ideas, including feminism, though feminist issues abound in the complicated interactions and power struggles played out through cooking and eating.

The modern world manifests an overwhelming human yearning for wholeness, oneness or integrity, a yearning apparent in oral appetites, sexual desire, religious fervour, physical hunger, 'back to the womb' impulses, death wishes. Even Doris Lessing's explorations of realism itself, explicitly in *The Golden Notebook*, suggest how strong is the human desire for a unifying vision. Some such yearning underpins the writing of food and eating in all these writers' work. Its most literal manifestation, perhaps, is in deep, often unacknowledged longing to be reunited with the maternal figure, a fantasised return to the status of wholly fulfilled infant at the breast, or even *in utero*. This might almost be said to be the ur-longing, a desire to be reunited with the block off which we are a chip. Such a sense of yearning is partly what powers Lessing's Alice Mellings in *The Good Terrorist*, and it is present throughout Michèle Roberts's writing, as her female protagonists struggle with all that might separate them from the maternal bond: men, social convention, betrayal, external controls, their own ambition, their mothers themselves. It is as part of that struggle that they sometimes revisit attachments to the maternal, discovering their own independent physicality through sensuous relationships with food and its preparation, as well as in relation to religion, culture, men and, above all, with other women past and present.

If a yearning for the mother is evident in Roberts's work, elsewhere the desire for oneness is more subterranean and more coded. It is

discernable, for example, in love relationships sought by hopeful romantics such as Atwood's Joan Foster (*Lady Oracle*), in sexual desire and in the wider play of appetites that pervade the fiction of Angela Carter. Eros, the libidinal drive, powers Carter's nurturing mother-substitutes (Aunt Margaret in *The Magic Toyshop*, Uncle Peregrine in *Wise Children*), her life-enhancing eaters, such as Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus* and her various sexual initiates. Indeed, the erotic appetite almost irresistibly demands completion. But the connection of food with sex, in Carter's fiction at least, can assume an insatiable and sometimes malignant eroticism, and both the predatory quality and the unappeasable nature of the appetite suggest not only Eros but something more deathly. The longing for consummation by negation is manifest in motifs and figures of cannibalism and vampirism in both Carter's and Atwood's novels and short stories. The monstrous appetites of these figures suggest an inner emptiness, fantasies of omnipotence or unfulfillable yearning for an impossible state of wholeness – a condition that may suggest deathly appetites in the modern sensibility.

A desire for oneness does not have to be either negative or regressive, however. It may indeed fuel the passage to enlightenment, as occurs to some extent with Carter's Desiderio and Walser (*The Infernal Appetites of Dr Hoffman* and *Nights at the Circus*) and Roberts's Thérèse and Léonie in *Daughters of the House*. Several of Doris Lessing's protagonists (Martha Quest and the protagonists of *The Golden Notebook*, *The Marriages of Zones Two, Three and Four* and *The Making of the Representative for Planet 8*) achieve a kind of wholeness through personal and spiritual growth. Lessing sets up this path to growth through a paradoxical *lack* of desire, as if to suggest we do not understand what we yearn for; in order to gain integrity and a sense of human connection her characters are put through breakdown and *disintegration*. This is brought about, in part at least, through self-starvation, the antithesis of Roberts's women's sensuous engagement. Elsewhere in Lessing's writing, characters such as Jane Somers are powered by a desire for more immediately human association, even attachment, and become materially involved in feeding and physical care for others, confronting in the process what is most disturbing about the body.

The spiritual growth Lessing focuses on is associated with striving for human or super-human connection and, even when this moves into a metaphysical realm in her writing, the desire and its fulfilment have a somewhat secular, and certainly anti-messianic, flavour. Religious

impulses seek a similar sort of metaphysical completion, but through the divine, and this can be seen in Alice Thomas Ellis's novels, which have a manifestly religious undercurrent of longing that is directly contrasted to the entanglements of food, sex and power that dominate her fiction. Each of Ellis's novels has a non-participant or semi-detached character whose longings are focused quite elsewhere, usually on death or divine immanence. This is thrown into relief by contrast with the most worldly of desires: the central characters' longing is for power, not for political but for personal reasons. This desire for power is an appetite, its gratification therefore fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying, and especially so by implied comparison with the numinous. Unlike the other writers considered here, Ellis's interest is moral rather than political: her self-aware, theatrical cooks use their cooking for delight, parody, social comment or even vicious satire; power is strenuously if wittily fought for and dubiously coupled with responsibility.

Emphasis on the need for responsibility and autonomy suggests a less egocentric interpretation of yearning for wholeness or integrity, and one which is implicit in all these writers, if most evident in Lessing and Atwood. Atwood, like Carter, explores the general and particular construction of victims (the eaten, the over-eaters, the self-consumers). Against the forces of oppression – in which she includes cultural constraints, political necessity, marital and familial pressures, the coercion of friends and self-created persecutions – she sets the need for women to resist the victim position. This resistance is effected through political engagement of the most basic (and food-related) kind. It suggests a connectedness that opposes social fragmentation and allays both individual and cultural yearnings for completion. Integrity has a similar ambiguity in Lessing's and Carter's writings, in both of which is discernible a socially focused, public agenda in which the desire for integrity takes the shape of political ideals and concomitant disillusion. Here we see both what is longed for and that it remains an ideal; community – the mutuality of, for example, shared cooking and eating – is punctured by individual isolation, and resisted by that in humans which cannot or will not join the feast.

Such hungers are the stuff of psychoanalytic theory, and much of the discussion in the following chapters consequently draws on Freud, Klein, Kristeva and others. This book is not restricted to psychoanalytic accounts of food and eating in literature, however, and its arguments

draw on a number of disciplines, including literary criticism, cultural studies and sociology. The central focus is on literary texts, illuminated by insights and ideas from a variety of perspectives. The resulting interdisciplinary approach is intended to reflect the complexity and importance of the subject, to allow a productive overview and to mirror the contradictory, integrative and associative functions of eating itself.

The book as a whole argues for the centrality and versatility of food and eating in women's writing. Not only does the action of the novels examined often occur through food preparation and eating, or through oral and alimentary preoccupation of one sort or another, food and eating themselves convey much of the meanings of the novels. This results from diverse factors such as the longings or hungers outlined above, deep associations between food and the psyche, specific socio-cultural pressures, especially on women's bodies, cultural and artistic inscriptions, and from the fact that food and its activities offer multiple possibilities for expression and action. Indeed, if anything could function as a universal signifier, it would surely be food.

The book is organised into chapters centred on specific food-related topics. The first chapter, 'The food of love: mothering, feeding, eating and desire', concerns the powerful relationship between food, love and sex across a range of writers. It examines maternal and pseudo-maternal nurturing, its responsibilities and failures, and the satisfactions and (dis)empowerment of the mothering role in a number of texts, Nancy Chodorow's seminal work *The Reproduction of Mothering* providing an analysis of this role and its perpetuation. The chapter moves on to an examination of the connection of food with sexuality, with the focus on Angela Carter's frequently erotic writing and Freud's linking of genital, anal and oral desire in 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality'.

Chapter 2, 'Cannibalism and Carter: fantasies of omnipotence', considers both the 'positive' desire for union with another expressed through cannibalism, and the more usual brutal and predatory cannibalism of myth and monster. Carter's cannibal motifs are considered briefly as figures of oppression and colonialism, but the chapter concentrates on interpretations in the light of psychoanalytic theory, especially Melanie Klein's theory of the oral stage and Freud's theory of life and death drives.

Despite their differences of focus and content, the perspective of these first two chapters is generally personal or individual. The third and fourth chapters provide a hinge between this and the more thoroughly

social focus of the final two chapters. Chapter 3, 'Eating, starving and the body: Doris Lessing and others', examines eating and not eating in relation to a culturally constructed 'ideal' female body image and in the light of anxieties about bodily functions and boundaries. Theory about the body and eating disorders, together with Julia Kristeva's writing of abjection, provides a perspective on self-starvation and related questions of control, empowerment and enlightenment, especially in Doris Lessing's fiction. The chapter concludes with a brief examination of the complicated relationship between the fat body and pleasure in eating, and argues for the disruptive, if equivocal, potential of the big woman.

Chapter 4, 'Sharp appetites: Margaret Atwood's consuming politics', takes as its focus a single writer whose writing encompasses virtually all the aspects of food, eating and appetite discussed in the book as a whole. The sheer variety of cultural and political issues focused through food and eating by a single writer testifies both to the importance of the activities themselves and to the richness and mutability of the subject as an adaptable metaphor or symbol. The central argument of the chapter concerns Atwood's overall emphasis, through food and eating, on women and responsibility.

The last two chapters discuss social eating. Chapter 5, 'Food and manners: Roberts and Ellis', is concerned with signifiers, tracing in Michèle Roberts's fiction the ways in which the connotations and significances of both food itself and the conventions surrounding it may be used to convey a wealth of subsidiary meanings. The argument draws on both sociological and anthropological research and broaches the question of control through social training. The chapter moves on to examine customs, manners and their significance in the context of Foucault's theory of 'micro powers', investigating the play of power relations through the activities surrounding cooking and eating in the novels of Alice Thomas Ellis.

'Social eating: identity, communion and difference', the final chapter of this book, is an attempt to formulate how we might truly speak of social eating, how the activities surrounding food might connect through food and eating. Factors examined in earlier chapters inform the discussion of fiction by Doris Lessing and Angela Carter, as do Anthony Giddens's analysis of the disconnections of modernity and Bakhtin's theory of carnival, and the complexity and difficulties of human interaction figure significantly. Indeed, the difficulties of any kind of community or communion are probably more firmly established than any ideal of collectivity, though none of the writers discussed extols an alimentary

individualism. If Carter stresses disruption and Lessing and Atwood emphasise both difficulty and responsibility, their fiction – like that of many other contemporary women writers – nevertheless repeatedly examines the social significances of all the activities connected with food.

The food of love: mothering, feeding, eating and desire

Food is a currency of love and desire, a medium of expression and communication. The crucial centrepiece of Christian worship is a simulated meal – the giving of symbolic bread and wine as a token of love and trust – and in most religions ritual communicative eating of some sort is prominent. From infants' sticky offerings to anniversary chocolates, from shared school lunch boxes to hospital grapes, the giving of food is a way of announcing connection, goodwill, love. For friends, food may be an expression of support or an invitation to celebrate; for lovers there is an intimate, sexual subtext, appetite incorporated into sexuality. In the all-important sphere of mothering, food-giving is a matter of routine; nurturing depends on repeated and regular care and feeding rather than the occasional spontaneous act and is, in theory at least, essentially altruistic.

For many people the connection of food with love centres on the mother, as a rule the most important figure in an infant's world, able to give or withhold everything that sustains, nourishes, fulfils, completes. It is this person who shapes or socialises a child's appetite and expectations of the world, by feeding on demand or adhering to a rigid schedule, by the cultivation of 'table manners', through the provision of fish fingers or porridge, raw fish or curry.¹ Along with nutrition she feeds her child love, resentment, encouragement or fear. Maternity provides a figure of limitless, irresistible authority, as the ancient matriarchal archetypes suggest. Yet the maternal role in western society is ambiguous, if not ambivalent; mothers are overwhelmingly powerful but at the same time are socially and domestically disempowered by their nurturing, serving role.

This ambiguity is reflected in representations of mothers and mother figures both as enslaved and as powerful providers of food. Actual mothers in literature, from Shakespeare to Carter (not to mention the nineteenth-century novel), are also frequently absent. Non-biological

mothering is widespread in literature, used both as an indicator of love and nurturing (or its lack), and to suggest burdens and disempowerment. Where nurturing mothers are featured, the experience evoked is most often that of the child, the grateful or resentful recipient, rather than that of the nourishing provider. Even in the plethora of 1970s' feminist novels and autobiographies featuring mothers, the mother–daughter relationship is almost invariably written from the daughter's perspective. This is partially accounted for in commonsense terms by the fact that we have all been children with wants and hungers, and that even women writers have not all been mothers. But occupying the child position also arguably has something to do with a prevailing culture of egocentricity, a clamour for gratification and a contemporary tendency to constantly re-examine our pasts. There are, of course, exceptions.

The writers who largely form the subject of this book between them explore and portray many of the complexities of maternal nurturing, from desperate infantile hungers and difficulties of relationship to the contradictory demands of the mothering role itself. The question of whether women's association with nurturing is biologically prompted or a social construction underlies the whole subject and will be seen to recur; it is notable how often these writers transpose female nurturing onto non-biological, substitute mothers. The importance of good mothering, its requirement of responsibility and individual mothers' failures through personal inadequacy, wickedness or the impossible and contradictory demands of the role itself are equally evident in these writers' work.

But first to return to the undeniably potent infantile extreme of the experience. Michèle Roberts's two earliest novels both retrace a young woman's almost ecstatic hunger for her mother, which is only in the end pacified by some sort of revisiting of the mother–child attachment. In *A Piece of the Night* Julie Fanchot rehearses in memory her sense of loss at being separated from and distanced by her mother ('The child is joined to the mother, the woman is joined to the man,' says her mother, 'That is what being a woman means'²), as she is trying to create adult bonds with her, and with her own women friends and lover. In *The Visitation* the protagonist Helen, aided by her closest friend Beth, accomplishes a symbolic revisiting of the pre-Oedipal, through which she achieves release. (Though Roberts herself does not specify the pre-Oedipal, the suggestion is of such an early bond, corresponding with Freud's view of the primary relationship between little girls and their mothers as being longer, more significant and more complex than that of boys.³)

In the following passage from *The Visitation*, the frantic, angry quality

of Helen's hunger leaps out, almost drowning the mother's own difficulties and conflicts in handling her baby:

The first word that she utters is *more*. It's a demand, a despairing plea, a shout of rage and frustration. Her mother has twin babies to feed. It's a lot of work, having two. Helen is all mouth, a gaping hole crying out to be filled. Her mother consults the words of doctors on the printed page. Fifteen minutes per baby, per breast, at specific intervals. No demand feeding in between. They'll have to learn, just like their mother does. If only I'd been able, she shyly tells Helen years later: to trust my own feeling rather than the books, I'd have fed you at night when you cried. I used to walk with you up and down the room, and I knew you were hungry and I didn't dare to feed you, because the doctor in the book said it was wrong. Instead, her own daughter later vilifies her. Helen's all impatience, hunger turning to a greed that's never known satisfaction, the pleasure of lying back, full and content. She strains for the forbidden breast, crying and red-faced, she gulps eagerly, too fast, and chokes. She distrusts this food, this thin, short-lived love given too abruptly and taken away too soon. She knows pleasure only by its absence. Instead of sweet milk, she is full of bilious hate: wind and emptiness. Oh, she's bad, a bad baby, there's no doubt of that. The baby book cracks like a whip.⁴

The narrative encompasses both maternal and filial experiences, but the primary focus is with the daughter; the descriptions of her are vivid and urgent, and the crying baby's emotions are named and written in a partially internal mode. It is hunger and frustration that Roberts emphasises, not nourishment. The upshot of mother's and daughter's mutual frustration is a prickly and unsatisfying relationship, and it falls to the significantly named grandmother, Mrs Home, to provide the food and endorsement that Helen craves. It is only with the grandmother's death that a rapprochement can begin between Helen and her mother, aptly enough encoded in food: 'Catherine has ransacked her larder and kitchen, now that her daughter proves willing to accept her gifts; they are suddenly pleased with one another, the items of food expressing all that remains unsaid' (119). The roots of adult dissatisfaction, Roberts suggests, lie with the earliest of eating experiences, a view quite in keeping with that of many psychologists (as will be seen in chapter 2).

Although she portrays relations as difficult for particular daughters and mothers, Roberts seems to endorse the idea of women-as-mothers-as-nurturers. This is expressed in its most general form in her fictional autobiography of Mary Magdalene, *The Wild Girl*, which proposes a female principle that would complete a Blakean unity, combining Father, Son and Holy (Mother) Spirit.⁵ Female nurturing is equally evident in a handful of caring mothers (*The Book of Mrs Noah, A Piece of*

the Night, In the Red Kitchen) and in displaced mothering, by grandmothers (Mrs Home), by nuns – such as those who teach Hattie to cook in *In the Red Kitchen* – by friends or simply by women in the grip of maternal impulses, like Hattie when she finds and comforts the ghostly Flora Milk shut in the cupboard for not eating her porridge, a time-leaping nurturing rendered literally and emotionally persuasive by its attention to detail: the remnants of bread, cheese and cold porridge, the child's crusted snot and smell of urine, her tears and shuddering and the comforting physical contact.⁶

Margaret Atwood's mothers, by contrast, are (with a few young exceptions) almost invariably portrayed through their daughters' eyes as monstrous or absent or ineffectual. Certainly most of them cause damage one way or another, profoundly affecting their daughters' appetites and capacity for future nurturing, though Atwood does use the device to varying effects, and whereas some of the daughters can become locked into reactive strategies, others develop a high level of independence.

The mothers come in different guises. They may be over-intrusive, controlling and competitive, driving their progeny to guilt and over-eating (Joan in *Lady Oracle*). They may be kind but unaware or unable to help, like the self-consuming Elaine's unconventional mother in *Cat's Eye*. They may die, like Grace's poor young mother in *Alias Grace*, or they may disappear, like Tony's runaway mother in *The Robber Bride* and the alcoholic mother who 'sells' Elizabeth and her sister to an unnurturing aunt in *Life Before Man*. Worst of all is the hopeless abusive mother of Charis in *The Robber Bride*, who cannot cope with being a single mother and yet does not understand the brusque, earthy nurturing her own mother provides. This slightly witchy grandmother is a positive if eccentric mother-substitute. She provides Charis with hearty unfussy food, country solace, psychic endorsement and a robust dismissal of conventional rules of hygiene and behaviour:

For dessert there was applesauce, and after that strong tea with milk in it. The grandmother passed a cup to Karen, and Karen's mother said, 'Oh, Mother, she doesn't drink tea,' and the grandmother said, 'She does now.' Karen thought there might be an argument, but her grandmother added, 'If you're leaving her with me, you're leaving her with *me*. 'Course, you can always take her with you.' Karen's mother clamped her mouth shut.

When Karen's grandmother had finished eating she scooped the chicken bones off the dinner plates, back into the stewpot, and set the plates down on the floor. The animals crowded around them, licking and slurping.

'Not from the dishes,' said Karen's mother faintly.

'Less germs on their tongues than on a human's,' said the grandmother.⁷

There is a pleasurable confuting of the unnurturing mother in these exchanges, as well as indications of the beginnings of a significant relationship between Charis and her grandmother. *Lady Oracle's* Aunt Lou, seen by Joan Foster as a magical antidote to her angry, controlling and inadequate mother, provides an urban variation of this idiosyncratic nourishing.

The transposing of the nurturing, feeding aspects of motherhood onto substitute figures is a way of avoiding a biologically determined essentialism, and Angela Carter's writing does just that. Natural mothers, as Nicole Ward Jouve points out, hardly feature in Carter's work but non-biological mothers are allowed to behave – and be constricted – maternally.⁸ *The Magic Toyshop's* Aunt Margaret is able, despite her subjugation at the hands of the patriarch Uncle Philip, to find solace and eloquent expression through her cooking. She welcomes Melanie and her siblings with food described in comforting, almost nursery terms: a 'steaming and savoury' pie, 'white bread and brown bread, yellow curls of the best butter, two kinds of jam (strawberry and apricot) . . . and currant cake'.⁹ She pours tea from a huge brown teapot and 'presides' over the table with evident satisfaction. The bright, homely picture evoked goes some way to sketching a maternal archetype, but it is an equivocal one. The giving of food and love are inseparable in the scene, but when the girls go to bed, Aunt Margaret gazes broodily at Victoria, and writes on her notepad, 'What a fine, plump little girl!' (48) – a fairy-tale flavoured reminder of the maternal capacity to devour.

The nearest Carter comes to providing an unequivocally nurturing maternal figure is with Grandma Chance in *Wise Children*. Encouraging and protective, Grandma Chance is a positive non-mother. Her strict vegetarianism provides the girls with vitamins, love and a code of empathetically moral behaviour, setting her in polar opposition to the twins' predatory, carnivorous cousin Saskia. Grandma Chance's attitude to food, though cabbage-ridden, is not joyless and she embraces treats, from theatre trips with cucumber sandwiches to lavish birthday cake and – her own favourites – Guinness and crème de menthe. Her nurturing is distanced by her being (ostensibly) grandmother rather than mother; it is vigorous, colourful, life-enhancing and fiercely loving, but never smothering.

The question of maternal responsibility is a theme Doris Lessing makes explicit in more than one novel. *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, in particular, is in part a review of nurturing and its lack in both personal and public contexts. Early in the novel the narrator accepts what is in effect a

maternal responsibility for a young girl called Emily who is left with her (thereby becoming a surrogate mother figure). Her care is quietly expressed through food: she goes out to find something for a 'welcoming meal' for Emily and her cat-dog Hugo; she provides for them both and encourages Emily in her cooking and foraging; she monitors Emily's adolescent eating phase and subsequent starving phase; she provides a refuge (with food) to which Emily can return from the stresses of living with the young leader Gerald and his household. Like any mother, she becomes anxious for her charge: 'how dark a foreboding it was, how I had come to watch and grieve over her, how sharp was my anxiety when she was out in empty buildings and waste lots'.¹⁰ Such anxiety has partly to do with control: how can a person exercise a duty of care over an absent charge? The parental dilemma of when and how to let go is clearly signalled, as is concern, not only about personal safety, but about influence, for once a child goes out into the world the parent's or guardian's power to mould and influence becomes diluted; as the narrator recognises, in a telling eating metaphor: 'people develop for good or for bad by swallowing whole other people, atmospheres, events, places' (50).

As the narrator's understanding progresses in the outer world, so her visits to a 'personal', dreamlike realm through the wall reflect, illuminate and expand upon her perceptions. Scenes from a composite early infancy (suggesting the narrator's, Emily's and her mother's childhoods¹¹) indicate general truths. The narrator witnesses a frenzied baby desperate for food and attention, portrayed just as frantically as Michèle Roberts's babies:

The baby was desperate with hunger. Need clawed in her belly, she was being eaten alive by the need for food. She yelled inside the thick smothering warmth; sweat scattered off her scarlet little face; she twisted her head to find a breast, a bottle, anything; she wanted liquid, warmth, food, comfort. (129)

She observes an uncomfortable hot child confined in a cot, in a white nursery with no visual stimulation or affectionate attention; she sees a sick child yearning to be cuddled by her mother; she watches helplessly while a little girl is 'tickled' remorselessly by her uneasy father; she sees the child listening to her mother complain endlessly about the burden of caring for her. Of all the scenes of deprivation and repression, the most immediately shocking is the disgusted mother's reaction to this infant's naturally curious exploration and tasting of her own excrement, the physical cruelty of the child's subsequent fierce cleaning, and the long lingering of her desolate sobs.

These scenes together add up to a representation of feeding without nurturing, providing a psychological aetiology for Emily's and the narrator's sense of duty and Emily's desire for fulfilment by Gerald. They suggest, too, grounds for the disintegration of the society at large. Though reader sympathy is initially engaged by the narrator's intense feeling for the miserable child, the infant's transmutation from Emily into her mother makes it clear that this woman too is helpless, doomed to repeat patterns of mothering within a socially constructed role of motherhood.

Lessing stresses the need for fundamentally different models of caring and responsibility. The possibility of achieving these is utopian, however, for the concept of an irresistible repetition of certain patterns of mothering is a powerful one. We know from the empirical evidence that has surfaced over the last few years that people who abuse children tend themselves to have been abused. Nancy Chodorow claims more radically that mothering *itself* is a repeating pattern; mothers produce daughters with definite 'mothering capacities' and evident 'desire to mother'.¹² She stresses that in nuclear families the narrow focusing of responsibility for 'mothering' on mothers alone, and consequent intensification of the mother-child relationship, becomes a vicious circle and is therefore self-perpetuating. Chodorow's 1978 study is obviously of its era, but her discussion is relevant to most of the fiction discussed here. In any case, her argument relies on ahistorical psychoanalysis: because of the disparity in the length of the pre-Oedipal phase between boys and girls, girls (with their extended attachment to the mother) are more imprinted with parental modes than boys and are thus more likely to subsequently place themselves in primary parent-child relationships.¹³

The danger posed by an extended mother-daughter attachment is of insufficient separateness. The ability to know when and how to relinquish control is as important as the initial provision of total care, and Chodorow outlines some of the dangers of a too-close bond: over-control, guilt feelings, lack of autonomy, mother-daughter hostility and even loss of self for the mother.¹⁴ One might add over-feeding, literally or metaphorically. The difficulty of recognising over-closeness, even where the bond is neither biological nor excessive, is apparent in the narrator's retrospective self-castigation in *Memoirs* in a comment which is simultaneously enlightened, judgemental and rueful in tone: 'Now I judge myself to have been stupid: the elderly tend not to see – they have forgotten! – that hidden person in the young creature, the strongest and most powerful member among the cast of characters inhabiting an

adolescent body, the self which instructs, chooses experience – and protects' (52).

To return to the reproduction of specific patterns of mothering, which I take to be more or less implicit in Chodorow's general argument: in the 'Children of Violence' novels, Lessing specifically names a 'nightmare of repetition', as Martha Quest struggles not to repeat her mother's pattern of upbringing. Both May Quest, who narcissistically cannot let go of the daughter she nevertheless fails to nurture, and Martha, who finds herself engaged in debilitating and frustrating feeding battles with her own little girl, find themselves failing to provide the mothering that they feel they should – and want to. Martha extricates herself from the situation to avoid repeating May Quest's failure to 'mirror' her child, to see her as separate and then reflect her back to herself as independent being – an essential developmental stage for both mother and child. But the cost of Martha's escape is to deprive her daughter of herself, and another fictional infant must thus be brought up by a surrogate mother.

It is not surprising that discussion of negative mothering should return to examples of biological mothers, for actual mothers frequently come under attack for failure to nurture. As suggested earlier, this may have to do with the portrayal of mothers from the perspective of the indignant infant (of whatever age). Even Martha Quest manages to pass on to her mother much of the blame for her own difficulties. Maternal failures may be variously categorised: as intrusiveness or excessive distance, for example, as force-feeding or denial, smothering or neglect. Sometimes writers exaggerate such failings into grotesque caricatures (Dickens, *par excellence*) and it is true that their symbolic value is great. Repressed or repressive, distant or unnurturing mothers are a particular feature of the literature of upper-middle-class English life. The mother in *Good Behaviour* (discussed in chapter 3) is a particularly unlikeable specimen: she treats her children with a vague and chilly disregard, preferring her painting, her gardening and her husband (in about that order); she neither supervises the abominable nursery food nor intervenes in times of illness or unhappiness, and her relief at being spared her children's company is almost palpable.

Failures of nurturing don't have to be associated with malignity, and may on the contrary reflect a mother's own insecurities and inadequacies (or, like Atwood's mothers, combine the two). Alice Thomas Ellis, who focuses acutely on maternal shortcomings, portrays a number of mothers whose nurturing of their offspring is problematic. Rose, in *The*

Sin Eater, feeds her adored twins on beguiling, magical food but she is too busy playing power games to protect them from mortal danger. The older Mrs Marsh in *The Birds of the Air* is benign; she is just hopelessly unable to reconcile her regard for conventions and appearances with affection for her troubled family.

In the novels collected as the 'Summerhouse Trilogy', which centre on the projected marriage of Margaret and Syl, Ellis portrays three separate mothers who fail, one way or another, to nurture.¹⁵ Most appealing of these is the elderly Mrs Munro, who is distanced from her unspeakable middle-aged son Syl by her own aging and by the fact that she does not in any case much like him. Margaret's estranged father's new young wife is condemned because she feeds her children pickled red cabbage and exists in a miasma of nursery incompetence. Finally Monica, Margaret's mother, is like Mrs Marsh without the affection. She bears some resemblance to Lessing's complaining maternal figure in the realm behind the wall in *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, seeing only her daughter's failure to conform to what she desires her to be. Crushed and disappointed, Monica's nurturing consists of attempts to mould Margaret into the (perfectly bourgeois) wife she feels she herself could – and should – have been. Her cooking is at once dull and fussy, her caring unimaginative and intrusive. Her actions are hopelessly contradictory; she both tries to hustle Margaret into middle age, in marriage to one of her own contemporaries, and infantilises her by trying to control what she wears and eats and trying to limit her intake of alcohol.

Apart from their failures of nurturing, what these fictional women share is a sense of embattlement, and their shortcomings are indeed at least in part attributable to the ambiguities inherent in their roles as mothers. In a child's eyes, the mother is immeasurably powerful, yet, especially before a child is 'socialised' into cooperativeness or obedience, the mother may, like Martha Quest with Caroline, find herself confronted by a small being with a powerful will. Anyone who has had charge of a baby or toddler will recognise the frustration of having to deal with clamped-shut lips and spat-out food. The experience of combined omnipotence, responsibility and powerlessness is deeply disturbing. It is difficult, to say the least, to handle concurrent tyranny and disempowerment.

The role of mother is equivocal, both in terms of ambivalent power relations with her children and because motherhood is associated in western culture with social and political powerlessness – that is to say a lack of legitimate and recognised power, not the manipulative and covert

influence traditionally associated with women. Angela Carter places *The Magic Toyshop's* Aunt Margaret in a maternal role precisely to emphasise her disempowerment. But the situation is neither straightforward nor static, and relative status can shift about considerably. The nurturing aspects of mothering and the pleasures to be gained from feeding people are apparent in the pleasure Aunt Margaret manifests in watching her brothers and the children eat. Such satisfactions are empowering. Aunt Margaret is the beneficent creator of nourishing and well-appreciated food, and in her husband's absence presides at the table. When Uncle Philip returns, however, her serving function is accentuated and her manner becomes entirely propitiatory. Patriarchy, Carter suggests, likes its mother figures benign, but impotent.

Given the thanklessness of the maternal role, surprisingly few novels dwell on the difficulties – or delights – of combining motherhood with something else, though there are literary landmarks, such as Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* or Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*. Michèle Roberts's *The Book of Mrs Noah* touches on the rewards and stresses of motherhood in its explorations of women's subjectivity, and her *A Piece of the Night* suggests an emotional juggling act for its protagonist Julie, if she is to nurture, love and feed both her child and the relationship with her lover Jenny. Roberts opposes a model of relaxed communal mothering (of several children by several mothers) to the pressure-cooker nuclear family of Julie's own background, but she does not gloss over the difficulties of cooperation, injecting Julie with a sudden jealousy that her daughter should be happy with other carers.

Implicit in scenes of positive maternal nurturing, particularly when seen from the mother's perspective, is the congruence of food and love. At the initial stages of an infant's life, indeed, they are almost inseparable, especially for mothers who breastfeed, and women almost invariably express love for their children through food. In a fulsomely hortatory article exploring some of the physical, emotional and spiritual resonances of breastfeeding, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos suggests that a danger of over-feeding flows directly from this congruence: 'Women who force their children to eat, who stuff them with food/love, may be extending their lactation powers and own fulfilment, forcing the child to act as the replete and filled vessel of her gift of nourishment.'¹⁶ The satisfactions are, it seems, as great for the giver of nourishment as for the recipient, characterised here as surprisingly passive. This is not only the case where children are concerned, the old adage 'the way to a man's heart is through his stomach' sardonically suggesting both the potency