

Food and the Literary Imagination

Jayne Elisabeth Archer,
Richard Marggraf Turley and
Howard Thomas



Food and the Literary Imagination

This page intentionally left blank

Food and the Literary Imagination

Jayne Elisabeth Archer

Richard Marggraf Turley

Howard Thomas

palgrave
macmillan



© Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Richard Marggraf Turley and Howard Thomas 2014
Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2014 978-1-137-40636-1

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No portion of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, Saffron House, 6–10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The authors have asserted their rights to be identified as the authors of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2014 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-48796-7 ISBN 978-1-137-40637-8 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9781137406378

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Archer, Jayne Elisabeth.

Food and the Literary Imagination / Jayne Elisabeth Archer, English Literature, Department of English and Creative Writing, UK; Richard Marggraf Turley, Professor of English Literature, Department of English and Creative Writing, Aberystwyth University, UK; Howard Thomas, Professor Emeritus of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences, Aberystwyth University, UK. pages cm

Summary: "People, international agencies and governments are increasingly concerned about the nature of our food, where it comes from, and the conditions in which it is produced. By close reading of a wide sweep of historical literature, including works by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Keats and George Eliot, *Food and the Literary Imagination* shows that such anxieties are nothing new, and that we are not confronting them alone. Too often, we engage with our rural, worked environments through the lens of apparently sentimental and incidental literary representations. The book recovers lost understandings of the materiality of life and sustenance for the authors and their first readers"—Provided by publisher. Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. English literature—History and criticism. 2. Food in literature. 3. Food security in literature. I. Turley, Richard Marggraf, 1970– II. Thomas, Howard, 1948– III. Title.

PR149.F66A73 2015

820.9'3564—dc23

2014029680

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Plates</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>About the Authors</i>	xiv
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xv
<i>Notes on Literary Texts and Note on Usage</i>	xvi
Prologue: Food Security and the Literary Imagination	1
1 Food Matters	4
Down the hatch	4
The hungry voice	5
Food security and the modern world	15
The three ages of food	21
The pastoral and the georgic	25
2 The Field in Time	30
Time, space and life	30
The legacy of ice and fire	33
How the field made us	37
Harvesting the sun	44
The social landscape	46
Fields ancient and modern	51
3 Chaucer's Pilgrims and a Medieval Game of Food	55
The silent Plowman	55
The game of food	58
The Plowman speaks	63
The politics of food corruption	67
Food unrest in <i>The Reeve's Tale</i>	75
Winners and losers	79
4 Remembering the Land in Shakespeare's Plays	80
The last load of corn	80
The cushion and the sack	82
The high-grown field	88

Idle weeds	92
A sheafe of wheate	101
5 Keats's Ode 'To Autumn': Touching the Stubble-Plains	106
What we think of when we think of Keats	106
The <i>materia medica</i> of the sweetshop	109
The pedestrian picturesque	111
Walking with Keats	114
At the eastern extremity: St Giles's Hill and 'To Autumn'	119
Winchester bushels: mobs and measures	123
Bread and butter poetry	126
Twinèd flowers: 'To Autumn' and <i>Lamia</i>	129
Keeping a very strict eye	131
The mill and the hay wain	133
Keats's car park	136
6 The Mill in Time: George Eliot and the New Agronomy	138
Tilting at watermills	138
An arable poetics	140
Agrarian alchymy	143
Water work	149
Rivers of corn	161
Epilogue: The Literary Imagination and the Future of Food	165
<i>Notes and References</i>	169
<i>Select Bibliography of Secondary Sources</i>	208
<i>Index</i>	213

List of Figures

- 1.1 Model of a sensory homunculus. Credit: Natural History Museum, London/Science Photo Library 6
- 1.2 George Cruikshank, *Merry Making on the Regents Birth Day* (London: J. Johnston, 1812), hand-coloured etching. Credit: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 12
- 1.3 The Food and Agriculture Organization Food Price Index, 1961–2014, 2000–14 www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/wfs-home/foodpricesindex/en. © FAO 18
- 2.1 C. H. Waddington's epigenetic landscape. Image source: K. J. Mitchell (2007), 'The Genetics of Brain Wiring: From Molecule to Mind,' *PLOS Biology* 5.4: e113 doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.0050113. © 2007 Kevin J. Mitchell 31
- 2.2 Transverse section of a leaf of Porcupine Grass. Credit and image source: P. W. Hattersley, in L. Watson and M. J. Dallwitz (1992 onwards), 'The Grass Genera of the World: Descriptions, Illustrations, Identification, and Information Retrieval; Including Synonyms, Morphology, Anatomy, Physiology, Phytochemistry, Cytology, Classification, Pathogens, World and Local Distribution, and References' <http://delta-intkey.com> 41
- 2.3 Scene from the 'Pandemonium' section of the London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony. © Pawel Kopczynski/Reuters 53
- 3.1 Woodcut from the *General Prologue* of Geoffrey Chaucer (1492), *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Richard Pynson), sig. cii^v. © The British Library Board, General Reference Collection G.11587.(1.) 58
- 3.2 Darnel (*Lolium temulentum* L). Images courtesy of John Harper, Aberystwyth University 72
- 4.1 Photograph of William Shakespeare's funerary monument, Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. Image reproduced by permission of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust 85

- 4.2 William Shakespeare's funerary monument, Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. Engraving by Wenzel [Wenceslaus] Hollar, from a sketch made in 1634 by William Dugdale, and first published in William Dugdale (1656), *The Antiquities of Warwickshire* (London: Thomas Warren), p. 520. © The British Library Board, General Reference Collection 191.d.12 86
- 4.3 Woodcut showing Red and White Darnel, from John Gerard (1597), *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (London: John Norton), p. 71. © The British Library Board, General Reference Collection 449.k.4 93
- 4.4 Illustrated frontispiece, Michael Drayton (1612), *Poly-Olbion* (London: Humphrey Lownes). © The British Library Board, General Reference Collection C.116.g.2 103
- 5.1 Looters ransack a convenience store in Hackney, East London, 8 August 2011. © Olivia Harris/Reuters 107
- 5.2 Map showing the 'Keats Walk' from Winchester Tourist Board's leaflet, 'A Winchester walk in the poet's footsteps'. © Winchester Tourist Board 117
- 5.3 *The College Tower, Library, and Mill*, engraving from Peter Hall (1830), *Picturesque Memorials of Winchester* (Winchester: Robbins and Wheeler), Pl. IV. © The British Library Board, BL General Reference Collection 10360.i.2 118
- 5.4 *View from St. Giles's Hill*, illustrated frontispiece from Charles Ball (1818), *An Historical Account of Winchester, with Descriptive Walks* (Winchester: James Robbins). The engraving is based on an aquatint by C. F. Porden. © The British Library Board, General Reference Collection 289.i.1 121
- 5.5 Bronze Exchequer Standard Winchester Bushel measure, 1601. © Science Museum/Science & Society Picture Library 124
- 5.6 *View from St. Giles's Hill*, engraving from John Milner (1839), *The History and Survey of the Antiquities of Winchester* (Winchester: James Robbins). © The British Library Board, General Reference Collection 1430.k.14 128
- 5.7 Chesil Street/St Giles's Hill car park, Winchester, August 2012. © Jayne Elisabeth Archer 137

- 6.1 *Bursting of the Bilberry Reservoir at Holmfirth*, illustrated
frontispiece, *Sorrow on the Land* (London: J. Mason, 1852).
© The British Library Board, General Reference Collection
1301.a.15 156
- 6.2 *A Winter Scene*, from ch. VII, 'Our Old Town Flooded', in
Thomas Miller (1857), *Our Old Town* (London: Brown and
Co.), p. 163. © The British Library Board, General Reference
Collection 12350.d.14 159

List of Plates

Between pp. 79–80

- 1 Time dependence of FAO Food Price Index from January 2004 to May 2011. Reproduced with permission of Professor Yaneer Bar-Yam, President, New England Complex Systems Institute <http://necsi.edu/research/social/foodcrises.html>
- 2 A scene from the Silurian period showing the first terrestrial plants colonizing land bordering a shallow sea. Image source: Jose Bonner (Own work) [CC-BY-SA-3.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>], via Wikimedia Commons
- 3 Composite satellite images of seasonal patterns of fire across Africa in 2005. Image source: NASA Earth Observatory <http://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/IOTD/view.php?id=5800>. NASA images courtesy of the MODIS Rapid Response Team, Goddard Space Flight Center
- 4 Colonization routes for temperate pasture grasses of the genus *Lolium*. Image source: modified and redrawn, based on Howard Thomas, Jayne Elisabeth Archer and Richard Marggraf Turley (2011), 'Evolution, Physiology and Phytochemistry of the Psychotoxic Arable Mimic Weed Darnel (*Lolium temulentum* L),' *Progress in Botany* 72: 73–104 (p. 78)
- 5 Distribution (%) of the UK National Ecosystem Assessment Broad Habitat types by area. Image source: Broad Habitat Distribution from 'The UK National Ecosystem Assessment: Synthesis of the Key Findings' (2011), based on data from Land Cover Map 2000 (R. M. Fuller, G. M. Smith, J. M. Sanderson, R. A. Hill and A. G. Thomson [2002], 'The UK Land Cover Map 2000: Construction of a Parcel-Based Vector Map from Satellite Images,' *Cartographic Journal* 39: 15–25). Reproduced by permission of the publishers of the UK NEA, UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre, Cambridge

- 6 Joseph Severn, *Portrait of Keats Listening to a Nightingale on Hampstead Heath* (1845), Guildhall Art Gallery, London.
© City of London Corporation
- 7 John Constable, *The Hay Wain* (1821), National Gallery (NG1207) © The National Gallery, London

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank colleagues at Aberystwyth University, particularly Peter Barry, Kerrie Farrar, John Harper, Helen Ougham, Wayne Powell and Mike Smith. We are also grateful for the advice and encouragement of Jane Davidson, Philippa Glasson, Alan Jenkins, Ann and Andy Parry, Adeline Johns-Putra, Anne Marggraf-Turley, Louise Squire, Damian Walford Davies and Diane Watt. Nick Battey (University of Reading) critically and constructively read our first published foray into the world of darnel and literature. Our research has been supported by the Leverhulme Trust, the BBSRC Excellence with Impact initiative, Aberystwyth University's Department of English and Creative Writing, and the New Phytologist Trust, to which we express our appreciation. Finally we acknowledge the Food (and coffee) that fuelled our Literary Imaginations, provided by Aberystwyth Arts Centre, scene of much of the discussion and planning over the five years or so that went into this book.

Some of the research in this book has appeared in other venues. Material on which Chapter 3 is based was published as "'Soper at oure aller cost": The Politics of Food Supply in the *Canterbury Tales*,' *Chaucer Review* (forthcoming). Chapter 4 draws on research published as 'The Autumn King: Remembering the Land in *King Lear*,' *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 63 (2012), 518–43; and as 'A Tragedy of Idle Weeds,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 February 2010, 14–15. Research for Chapter 4 also contributed to the ASLE-UKI/INSPIRE 2013 Prize Essay on Literature and Sustainability, 'Reading with the Grain: Sustainability and the Literary Imagination' (also delivered as a public lecture at *Telegraph Hay Festival*, 23 May 2013, filmed by Sara Penrhyn Jones), and an article in a special issue of *Green Letters*. Material from Chapter 5 was published as 'Keats, "To Autumn", and the New Men of Winchester,' *Review of English Studies*, 64 (2012): 797–817; as 'Keats's Prospects,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 December 2012, 14–15; and was also presented in the form of a blog on Oxford University Press's webpage: <http://bit.ly/GBYur3> [date accessed: 23 March 2012]. Findings from Chapter 6 have been published as "'Moving Accidents by Flood and Field": The Arable and Tidal Worlds of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*,' *English Literary History* (forthcoming). The primary source for discussions of darnel in this book is the authors' review 'Evolution, Physiology and

Phytochemistry of the Psychotoxic Arable Mimic Weed Darnel (*Lolium temulentum* L),' *Progress in Botany* 72, ed. U. Lüttge *et al.* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2011), pp. 73–104.

We wish to thank the editors and organizers of these publications and events for the opportunity to publish the scholarship from which this book grew, and we are grateful to the journal editors and readers for their invaluable, insightful comments and suggestions.

About the Authors

Jayne Elisabeth Archer was a Lecturer in the Department of English and Creative Writing, Aberystwyth University, between 2005 and 2014. Her research interests are alchemy, science and the pseudo-sciences in early modern literature – especially literature by and for women – and she has published on several aspects of early modern culture and the historiography of alchemy.

Richard Marggraf Turley is Professor of English Literature in the Department of English and Creative Writing, Aberystwyth University, and he is the University's Professor of Engagement with the Public Imagination. He is the author of several monographs and articles on Romanticism, including *Keats's Boyish Imagination* (2004) and *Bright Stars: John Keats, Barry Cornwall and Romantic Literary Culture* (2009). He is also the author of a novel set in the Romantic period, *The Cunning House* (2015).

Howard Thomas is Emeritus Professor of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences at Aberystwyth University and a Fellow of the Learned Society of Wales. He has held visiting professorships at universities in Switzerland and the United States. His research interests include the genetics, evolution and uses of food plants. He also has a special interest in the cultural significance of scientific research and promotion of links between science and the arts. He is co-author of *The Molecular Life of Plants* (2013).

List of Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London, UK
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Douay-Rheims	Douay-Rheims Latin Vulgate Bible, www.latinvulgate.com
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Geneva	<i>The Geneva Bible</i> , trans. William Whittingham, Anthony Gilby and Thomas Sampson <i>et al.</i> (Geneva: Rowland Hall, 1560)
HRO	Hampshire Record Office, Winchester, Hampshire
KJV	The Bible, King James Version (London: Robert Barker, 1611) www.kingjamesbibletrust.org/the-king-james-bible/digitized-kjv-of-1611/genesis
NA	The National Archives, Kew, London
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> www.oxforddnb.com
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> www.oed.com
SBTRO	Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Records Office, The Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon
STC	<i>A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad 1475–1640</i> (1976–86), comp. A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave, 2nd edn, 2 vols (rev. W. A. Jackson and F. S. Ferguson) (London: Bibliographical Society)
WHO	World Health Organization

Notes on Literary Texts

- Chaucer All quotations from Geoffrey Chaucer's works are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer* (2008), ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press)
- Shakespeare All quotations from William Shakespeare's plays (except *King Lear*) are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (2005), ed. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett and William Montgomery, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press; 1st edn 1986)
- All quotations from *King Lear* are taken from *The History of King Lear*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford University Press, 2008)
- Dates for Shakespeare's plays – several of which are conjectural – are taken from *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* (2001), ed. Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge University Press), pp. xix–xxx
- Keats All quotations from John Keats's poetry are taken from *The Complete Poems* (2006), ed and intr. John Barnard, 3rd edn (London: Penguin Classics), and all quotations from Keats's correspondence are taken from Hyder Edward Rollins's edition of the *Letters* (1958), 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)
- Eliot All parenthetical page numbers for quotations from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) are taken from the Vintage edition, intr. Marina Lewycka (London, 2010)

Note on usage

Throughout this book, 'corn' is used in the traditional English sense to mean wheat – or, occasionally, to refer to temperate cereals in general, including barley or oats. For the large-grained cereal usually called 'corn' in US English we use the name 'maize'.

Prologue

Food Security and the Literary Imagination

The wheat looked very well all the way, & James says
the same of his road.

Jane Austen, Letter to Cassandra Austen, 23–24
August 1814¹

The subject of this book is food – where it comes from, how it gets to where it’s needed, what happens when the flow of sustenance from field to table breaks down, and how writers have engaged creatively with these matters over the ages. In the developed world, political and economic responses to the privations of the global conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century ushered in, for many of us, an age of cheap and abundant food. But now, for the first time in a generation, food security is once again worrying nation states and international agencies. Bookshelves and e-readers reflect this concern: Lester R. Brown, *Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity* (2012); Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (2008); Paul Roberts, *The End of Food: The Coming Crisis in the World Food Industry* (2009); Carolyn Steel, *Hungry City: How Food Shapes Our Lives* (2008). Approaching food security from different perspectives and interests, the present work shows that it is not simply a matter of hunger and how to feed the hungry. Encompassing, *inter alia*, land ownership, the productivity of soil, climate (and climate change) and food purity, ‘food security’ is a deceptively simple term for a dauntingly complex phenomenon, an intricate web of factors penetrating every aspect of our lives. Any solution must, of necessity, involve many agencies and multiple interested parties. It must bring together the work of food producers, scientists, food manufacturers and distributors, transport agencies, politicians, planning authorities – and, we argue, writers.

Looking back to the past so that we may engage with and respond to the present crisis of sustenance, *Food and the Literary Imagination* argues that we are not facing the present crisis alone, nor for the first time. The careers and creative output of some of our greatest writers have coincided with and been informed by moments that witnessed heightened concern with food security. On close examination, their concerns turn out to be strikingly, sometimes uncannily, similar to those of the early twenty-first century. When we read canonical texts with modern eyes, we necessarily add layers of hindsight and bring our own preoccupations and anxieties to bear; but something revelatory, both of the past and of the unfolding future, happens when we accept these works to be embedded in their time, and to be what they seem to be and not something else.

Written over 700 years ago, in the late fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, one of the foundational works of the English literary canon, is a game of food, with each one of Chaucer's pilgrims telling stories in the hope of winning a slap-up meal paid for by their fellow travellers and storytellers. More so than politics and religion, food has proved to be a universal language, resistant to the vicissitudes of time and place. The pilgrims themselves are described and made memorable to us by their diverse relationships with food – and, of course, drink. Chaucer's own career brought him into close contact with the regulation of food supply. The grandson and son of vintners, Chaucer held the post of Comptroller of Customs in the port of London for 12 years, during which time he oversaw the import and export of food-stuffs and other goods. This awareness of food as a commodity, subject to speculation and fluctuations in the early market economy, informs his analysis of inequities in food distribution and land ownership as related in the tales told by his fictional pilgrims. Similarly attuned to the value of food in markets, William Shakespeare used opportunities presented by the contemporary experience of dearth in order to safeguard his own future. In his plays, however, he offers sophisticated and sustained critiques of government mismanagement of food supply and natural resources. Looking closely at *King Lear* (1605–6), we will reconstruct his use of a series of botanical allusions to figure – for an audience that was rapidly losing touch with its agrarian origins – important lessons about corruption, treachery and legitimacy. Equally, John Keats's 'To Autumn', which, of all the texts under consideration perhaps seems closest to the traditional pastoral/georgic dyad, is revealed to be a poem seething with local and contemporary disputes over ownership of land and the rights and means to food processing and production. What

seems, at first glance, to be a poem of timelessness and abundance, in fact registers, in a very particular and focused way, local and national debates about food prices and measures, and the relationship between land and labour. Finally we turn to the mill, the juncture where the (literal) fruits of land and labour are transformed into foodstuff. George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) places the mill at the centre of the economic and social tides flooding through a rapidly industrializing and urbanizing world.

Chaucer, Shakespeare, Keats and Eliot: four canonical writers whose works – narrative poetry, drama, lyric poetry, novel – are widely felt to embody key aspects of national character. They are familiar to us; indeed, through their hyper-canonical status, *overly* familiar – suitably comfortable reading for an urban elite. To be sure, these writers are for all ages; but each is also of her or his own age. And by carefully re-reading their works, we are able to re-situate these authors within their own historical contexts, reconnecting them with their unique – but, as we demonstrate, also familiar and newly urgent – experiences of food unrest. All four were once regarded as radical figures (something we often forget), and had radical things to say about dysfunction in the food nexus.

We suggest that overfamiliarity with these canonical authors, and of course the subtlety of their writing, obscures from our view their acute and imaginative engagements with food security. The rise of historicism (in all its different stripes) in literary and cultural studies has made it almost second nature to situate a literary work in its historical context, as a reflection of the life and times of its author and first readers, and in dialogue with contemporaneous texts. Post-Marxist historicist studies and ecocritical studies have touched on issues relating to food security, and, in the questions they ask and the questions they fail to ask, these studies are instructive if we are to become attuned to the relationship between food security and the literary imagination. Since the literary tradition within which Chaucer, Shakespeare, Keats and Eliot have achieved Olympian status is the English one, the emphasis of our story is necessarily on the history of sustenance in the British Isles; nevertheless the reach of the relationships we discern between text and food is global. This book seeks to open a critical aperture into a historical mood of crisis that has resonant continuities with our own anxieties and dilemmas in respect of relations between humanity, agriculture and the environment.

1

Food Matters

A revolution is not a dinner party.

Mao Zedong (Chairman Mao)¹

Down the hatch

In the language of topology, the branch of mathematics concerned with shapes and surfaces, the form of a ring doughnut is called a torus. Topologically an animal is a torus, with the digestive tract forming the equivalent of the hole in the doughnut. In other words, the gastrointestinal system is technically outside the body (hence egestion rather than excretion is the correct term for the elimination of digesta). Food moves through the human gut at the rate of about 0.25 m h^{-1} . The comedian Peter Cook considered it ‘very interesting’ that what we eat is therefore ‘never ... really fresh’.²

Before the era of X-rays, CT scanners, safe invasive surgery and the like, examining faeces (and urine) was medically important since it represented just about the only way of finding out about the state of one’s innards. The digestive tract as a passageway, simultaneously within and outside the body, has always been a source of linguistic metaphor and imagery for the creative artist. The mouth in particular – a multifunctional apparatus if ever there were one – is far more than ‘the orifice in the head of a human or other vertebrate through which food is ingested and vocal sounds emitted’ (*OED*). It lends itself figuratively to a point of exit such as river mouth or the mouth of a tunnel, the mouthpiece of a musical instrument, the barrel of a firearm, the orifice leading into a chamber or vessel, such as a jug, furnace, cave, volcano, flower or vagina. The written, visual and performing arts abound with images of swallowing-up, from the Biblical Jonah and the Leviathan to Dante’s *Inferno*, Swift’s modest

proposal, Goya's horrific image of Satan devouring his son, Alice and the rabbit-hole that leads to Wonderland, the lover and bibliophile being force-fed a book in Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989), Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter, Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005) – a documentary about the death of Timothy Treadwell and his partner, who were eaten by one of the grizzly bears they lived among – and the pie served by Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus to his arch-enemy Tamora.³ The latter example, in which a mother unwittingly eats the flesh of her two sons, equates the mouth with the anus, the womb with the tomb:

Titus Why, there they are, both bakèd in this pie,
Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,
Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.
(Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* [1592], 5.3.59–61)

Maggie Kilgour has shown that the Eucharist and anthropophagy (the act of eating human flesh, whether one's own or another's) and the opposition between outside and inside are pervasive metaphors in Western literary works.⁴ (The Eucharist as a type of anthropophagic foodstuff freighted with socio-political as well as religious meaning is something we'll explore further in Chapter 3.) These connect with the mouth as an erogenous zone, the interrelationship of sexual and nutritional gratification, and various sado-masochistic and cannibalistic fetishes such as vorarephilia, in which an individual is sexually aroused by the thought of eating, being eaten or watching others eat.

The hungry voice

Skin keeps you in, but primarily keeps things out. (This has not stopped the cosmetics and health industries from 'feeding' skin with vitamins, DNA, collagen, arginine, antioxidants, peptides, seaweed extract, serum, herbal extract, essential oils and various milks.) However, in the few short millimetres between the skin of the face and the lining of the mouth, everything changes. Figure 1.1 shows the 'sensory homunculus', in which is represented the relative perception of the motor system as it is distributed around the human body. It shows that the mouth and tongue command a disproportionate amount of the brain's attention.

The evolution of the human vocal apparatus, with its rounded tongue and descended larynx, has made it difficult for the mouth to carry out more than one of its functions at a time.⁵ For reasons of physiology,



Figure 1.1 Model of a sensory homunculus. Parts of the body are sized according to how much space the brain gives to processing sensory information about that part of the body

and of social convention ('don't talk with your mouth full'), if you eat you can't speak. Western history and literature are full of food disputes which serve as metaphors for vocal clashes and full-scale revolutions. Katniss Everdeen, the figurehead of rebellion against the repressive state, the Capitol, in Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008–10), remarks: 'It [the Capitol] must be very fragile, if a handful of berries can bring it down.'⁶ In fact, political and power systems have often been challenged by the decision to eat or not to eat. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) uses wheat to represent its aims, and all major world religions have used grass or grass products as metaphors (the Romans had their own personification of agricultural disease, Robigus). Grass is the first plant mentioned in the Old Testament. For the Abrahamic religions, human servitude began when Eve and Adam

consumed the wrong type of fruit (the fruit of the tree from which they were forbidden to eat). The resulting 'curse' is described in agricultural terms. First, human reproduction is compromised. Secondly, as weeds are released from the earth, arable farming is itself transformed. This is God's pronouncement (to Adam, it seems):

I will put enmitie betweene thee and the woman, and betweene thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head ... cursed is the ground for thy sake: in sorrow shalt thou eate of it all the dayes of thy life. Thornes also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee: and thou shalt eate the herbe of the field. In the sweate of thy face shalt thou eate bread, till thou returne vnto the ground. (Gen. 3: 15–19, KJV)

The next curse to fall on humankind, resulting in inequality within and between peoples together with the concept of racial differentiation, is figured as a choice between types of farming. God favours Abel's gift of lamb over Cain's sheaf of wheat ('the herbe of the field'). The reason for God's preference is, as with His ways more generally in the Old Testament, mysterious; the wording of the relevant passage in Genesis is obscure:

Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the processe of time it came to passe, that Cain brought of the fruite of the ground, an offering vnto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings [firstborn] of his flocke, and of the fat thereof: and the LORD had respect vnto Abel, and to his offering. But vnto Cain, and to his offering he had not respect: and Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. (Gen. 4: 2–5, KJV)

For Cain, God's meaning is quite clear: God prefers Abel because he prefers the food he produces. A choice between varieties of fruit (licit and illicit) has become a choice between methods of food production, and the outcome is the first murder and the second 'fall' of humankind (the so-called 'curse' of Cain). God, it seems, prefers pastoral over arable farming, and although both forms were, and continue to be, essential to human survival, the favouring of the former over the latter can also be perceived in the New Testament (as Colin Tudge observes, 'it was the shepherds, successors of Abel, who attended the birth of Jesus. No one turned up with a sack of barley').⁷ Daniel Quinn, in his philosophical novel *Ishmael* (1992), suggests that the story of Cain and Abel's gifts perhaps mirrors the more widespread shift in emphasis between these

two forms of farming in the Middle East ten millennia before the turn of the Common Era.⁸ Running concurrent with this Biblical narrative, the classical tradition opens with its own version of a food dispute: the Trojan War. The history of the Greek mainland in the first millennia BCE was overshadowed by its inability to feed itself. A battle for control of the Bosphorus, and, with it, access to the rich grain-growing regions and forests of the Black Sea, the Trojan War of Homer's account can be read as an allegory for a protracted and sprawling resource war. The beautiful Helen is thus a proxy for grain, pasture and wood – the things for which men would truly launch a thousand ships.⁹

The political history of food is as much about stifling vocal expression as it is about nutrition. Bread and circuses are supposed to keep the population distracted and placid. If they are restless because they have no bread, let them, in the words of 'one highly placed observer' (to use E. P. Thompson's sardonic phrase), eat cake.¹⁰ 'The murmuring poor,' wrote the late eighteenth-century poet George Crabbe, 'will not fast in peace.'¹¹ Whereas a single, articulate voice of opposition can be argued with or shouted down, there is something disconcerting about a voice that is just audible but inchoate, and especially when that single voice becomes one of many. We will return to the threat posed by a particular group of 'murmurers' – the medieval religious reformers known as the Lollards – in Chapter 3.¹²

Food, then, is a gag (in at least two meanings of the word). The Abbot of Burton boasted that in thirteenth-century law, serfs possess 'nothing but their own bellies'.¹³ When the voice of protest is liberated by dearth, it often aggregates to become a mobile chorus, the soundtrack to the particular form of direct action recognized as the food riot. E. P. Thompson's seminal 1971 study of food riots starts with Proverbs 11: 26, which seems to play with God's withholding of a certain type of fruit in Genesis 1: 'Hee that withholdeth corne, the people shall curse him' (KJV).¹⁴

Thompson takes issue with what he calls the 'spasmodic view of popular history', in which the common people 'can scarcely be taken as historical agents before the French Revolution'.¹⁵ He argues that crowd action in eighteenth-century Britain is almost always driven by some 'legitimizing notion' and that the 'food riot' in this period was 'a highly complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives'.¹⁶ There was a prevalent expectation as to what constituted legitimate practices in the food chain ('the eighteenth-century bread-nexus') and spasms of rioting represented reactions to offences against these conventions.¹⁷ Moral outrage, quite as much as deprivation, drove direct action. Long-standing tensions between the towns and countryside also