

# **Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity**

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*Alison Stone*



# **Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and Maternal Subjectivity**

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# Introduction

## Maternity Between Body and Subjectivity

... a woman as mother would be ... a strange fold that changes culture into nature, speaking into biology ...

Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater'

In this book I explore the relations between subjectivity and the maternal body. I suggest, following numerous feminist thinkers, that in the West the self has often been understood in opposition to the maternal body, such that one must break away from the mother and maternal care-givers on whom one depends in infancy and childhood to become a full participant in the spiritual, political, or cultural values of one's community. A widespread modern, more individualistic version of these assumptions is that separating from the mother is necessary to become an individual subject, a self-conscious and autonomous agent who is the source of normative authority and meaning.<sup>1</sup> Since our infantile relationships to our mothers are profoundly bodily relationships, within which we perceive and respond to our mothers as bodily figures, this separation that we are each expected to effect is specifically from our mothers as bodily beings. Ultimately, what we are expected to separate from is the whole field of maternal body relations: the realm of intimate mother-infant dependency in which flows and exchanges of affect and bodily energy take place.

My particular concern is about the effects that these assumptions have on mothers in the contemporary world: namely, to make maternal subjectivity problematic. That is, these ingrained assumptions make it relatively difficult for us to recognize mothers as subjects, and they make it relatively difficult for mothers to regard themselves as subjects or to exercise their capacities for subjectivity. This problem arises because it is characteristic of mothering that in it the mother re-enters the field of maternal body relationships that she had formerly left behind (or so I will argue in this book). To mother and to relate to her child from a maternal position, the mother must re-inhabit the realm of bodily intimacy and dependency. Moreover, to do so the mother has to draw upon and re-activate her own, hitherto largely forgotten, history of maternal body relations. The mother re-enters her own maternal past, which comes alive for her again in the new form of her present-day relationship with her child. Insofar as mothers are immersed in maternal body relations in this way, it seems—given our tendency to oppose subjectivity to these relations—that mothers cannot be subjects.

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One might object that surely mothers are subjects, just in the sense that they have experience.<sup>2</sup> However, I understand subjectivity in a more restricted sense. To be a subject one must not only have or live through experience, one must also *author* the meaning of that experience, and one must exercise some *autonomy* in doing so, departing from given horizons of meaning to regenerate new meanings adapted to one's own situation and history. Even so, one might object that mothers do give meaning to their experience, articulate and structure it, and author these structures, so that mothers are subjects even in the more restricted sense.

My reply is: Yes and no. Of course, mothers do render their experience meaningful as far as they can. But we should not discount the influence that inherited habits of thought and imagination have on our lived experience. This influence is such that mothers are often not properly recognized as subjects by other individuals around them. Indeed, mothers often experience the transition to motherhood in terms of just this loss of recognition. Having formerly been seen as agents of their own lives and treated by others as centers of agency, suddenly they find themselves perceived as largely subservient to the child(ren) for whom they care. The child is at least seen as a potential subject; the mother is seen merely as the background and nourishing soil of her child's subjectivity-to-be. 'I was delivered of my identity at the same time [as my baby]', Ann Oakley concludes, 'prevented from being the central figure in the drama of my life' [1979] (1981, 3).<sup>3</sup>

In turn, it can become difficult for mothers to recognize themselves to be subjects or to exercise their capacities for choice and agency or their powers to generate meaning. The transition to motherhood can therefore feel like a transition into chaos, in which 'the days drift through in a haze' (new mother Sylvia, quoted in Nicolson 1998, 83)—a morass of half-sensation in which the mother can discern no coherent meaning or pattern. In her book about her experience of becoming a mother, *A Life's Work*, Rachel Cusk evokes how her very body seems to have become chaotically disarranged:

In the morning I would sit up in bed, the room listing drunkenly about me, and would put a hand to my face, checking for some evidence of disfigurement: an eyebrow, perhaps, slipped down to my cheek, a deranged ear cluttering my forehead, a seam at the back of my skull gaping open. (Cusk 2001, 178)

Another frequent experience amongst mothers is loss of control: 'I was in control of my life . . . and that's completely gone out of the window. And I . . . hadn't really been prepared for those feelings of actually being out of control', says new mother Helen (quoted in Miller 2005, 102). Not infrequently, then, mothers feel that in re-entering the realm of maternal body relations they have fallen into a formless realm that excludes meaning and agency.

Nonetheless, mothers do strive to forge meaning and to organize the patterns that emerge in their experience. To this extent, the objection

that mothers always are subjects has some validity. Mothers do strive to regain subjectivity where it has been compromised. But this cannot be the usual kind of subjectivity premised on separation from the maternal body. If mothers are subjects, they can only be subjects of a new kind, who generate meanings and acquire agency *from* their place in maternal body relations. This is how I shall interpret maternal subjectivity in this book: as a specific form of subjectivity that is continuous with the maternal body.<sup>4</sup>

This inquiry into maternal subjectivity builds upon earlier feminist critiques of the subject. In Luce Irigaray's famous formulation, 'any theory of the "subject" will have always been appropriated as "masculine"' (Irigaray [1974] 1985a, 133).<sup>5</sup> Irigaray's point is that historically, at least in the modern period, the subject has commonly been viewed as emerging in a break with the maternal body as a female body. This view effectively makes it impossible to be a subject and be female-bodied, since it predicates subjectivity upon a rejection of female embodiment. Hence, Irigaray continues: 'In subjecting herself to any such theory, woman without knowing it renounces the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary'—by which Irigaray means woman's 'imaginary' relationship to her own female bodily form.<sup>6</sup> Instead, women can assume subjectivity only by modeling themselves upon men, while they can inhabit their female embodiment only by accepting the status of mere objects. Thus, Irigaray concludes, woman 'submits to being objectified by discourse—insofar as she is "female". Re-objectifying her own self whenever she claims to identify herself as a masculine subject'.

Originally articulated in 1974, when it was subsequently received in the English-speaking academy Irigaray's critique tied in with the range of post-modern and post-structuralist critiques of the subject which became prominent in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing upon Foucault, Nietzsche, Freud, and Lacan, theorists advancing these critiques understood subjectivity variously as an effect of language, a product of power relations, and a psychical construction predicated on the repression of a prior multiplicity of drives, affects and mental elements. Common to these approaches is the thought that subjectivity is not a fundamental reality but is dependent upon and derivative of other pre- and non-subjective variables.

Some feminists worried that wholesale criticism of the concept of the subject was damaging to feminism, pulling the rug from under exercises of collective female agency just as they were emerging (for a classic statement, see Hartsock 1990). Yet the various post-structuralist critiques of the subject do not necessarily invalidate the concept of subjectivity or imply that we should abandon it altogether. Instead, we can interpret them as critiques of a more Kantian kind, giving accounts of the pre- and non-subjective conditions that make subjectivity possible both as a concept and as a practical, lived way of understanding and experiencing the self.<sup>7</sup> Irigaray, for instance, says that she aims to

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interrogate the *conditions of possibility of systematicity itself*: . . . For example the ‘matter’ from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce itself, to reproduce itself; . . . the *mirror*, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject, to redouble itself, to reflect itself by itself. (Irigaray [1977] 1985b, 74–75)

One’s account of the conditions that make subjectivity possible may, though, expose that these include social conditions of exclusion and oppression, thereby revealing serious ethical and political problems with subjectivity, at least in its main historical shape until now. Along these lines Irigaray concludes that an exclusion of women, and a devaluation of all things actually and symbolically female, have become built into the conception of the subject. Nonetheless, I agree with Nancy Hartsock that feminism requires some conception of the subject. Feminist criticism of traditional institutions, practices, and world-views would not be possible without the belief that we can legitimately stand back from what is given, reassess the given critically, and use our powers of autonomous thought and action to imagine and institute preferable alternatives—and the concept of the subject articulates and enshrines all these ideas. Ironically, without these ideas and the concept of the subject that encapsulates them feminist criticism of traditional conceptions of subjectivity would not even be possible. Therefore, ethical critiques of the subject such as Irigaray’s are most coherently read as establishing that we need to reconceive subjectivity—not to reject the concept altogether, but to rethink and re-imagine it outside its usual traditional parameters.

One of the main feminist endeavors to have arisen out of Irigaray’s and similar critiques is an exploration of the possibility of female subjectivity. Feminists have sought to rescue women from object status by reconceiving subjectivity so that it no longer excludes women. My project here is somewhat different, and is to inquire into the possibility of maternal subjectivity. Maternal subjectivity is (I take it)<sup>8</sup> a variation on female subjectivity, but it is important to treat the two as distinct, otherwise we lose sight of what is peculiar to maternity.<sup>9</sup> As Lisa Baraitser writes, it is necessary to ‘repeat the second-wave move to uncouple maternity and femininity . . . not this time for the sake of the feminine, but for the sake of the maternal’ (2008, 10). With respect to this earlier ‘uncoupling’ move, many feminist philosophers who have sought to retrieve female subjectivity have endeavored to disentangle it from motherhood. As we’ve seen, Irigaray argues that women have been excluded from the status of subjects because they have been equated, as females, with the maternal body. For Irigaray, therefore, a condition of possibility for female subjectivity is that each daughter should be able to distinguish herself from her mother and her mother’s body, as she cannot adequately do at present. Irigaray writes:

When I speak of the *relation to the mother*, I mean that, in our patriarchal culture, the daughter is absolutely unable to resolve her relation

to her mother. Nor can the woman resolve her relation to maternity, unless she reduces herself to it. . . . [On the dominant view] there is no difference between being a mother and being a woman, . . . there is no articulation to be made, by the woman, between these two desires of hers. (Irigaray 1985b, 143)

Conversely, I suggest that for maternal subjectivity to be possible the *mother* must be able to assume a subject-position distinct from that of the daughter. Mothering is a variation on being a daughter, insofar as the mother replays with her child her own maternal past. Yet this maternal replaying of the past is a replaying *with a difference*. This difference makes the maternal position a distinct one, and brings with it various further implications for the distinctive structure of maternal subjectivity.

What are ‘subject-positions’? To be a subject, one must tacitly identify oneself *as* a subject and do so, implicitly, under a certain description—for instance, in the chief modern form, as a unitary, autonomous, thinking agent (Carr 1999, 36–37). Further, as Julia Kristeva ([1974], 1984) shows, to be able tacitly to identify oneself in this way one must stand in a particular set of psychological relations to others. Consequently different kinds of psychological relations with others, and different ways of locating oneself within those relations, make possible different subject-positions: different ways of identifying oneself as a subject, under different implicit descriptions. If breaking from the mother makes possible modern subjectivity in its typical form, conversely re-situating oneself within maternal body relations makes possible a different form of subjectivity. Re-situating oneself, as the mother does, within past maternal body relations that are recurring with a difference makes possible yet another form of subjectivity.

Besides building on critical analyses of the subject, this inquiry also builds on the rehabilitation that the body has undergone in contemporary philosophy and theory. I share in the widespread rejection of the traditional Cartesian view that bodies are mere extended stuff. My particular aim, though, is to recover the intelligence and agency not of bodies *per se* but of early maternal body relations. Through these relations, our bodily energies, affects, and repertoires of habit and gesture become patterned in significant ways; this occurs prior to and as the precondition of our generating meaning from these body relations. Here I draw upon Kristeva’s view that maternal body relations, or the ‘archaic maternal’ realm (Kristeva [2000] 2001, 126), are the site of the particular pre-linguistic form of significance that she calls the semiotic.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, though, the significance that emerges within maternal body relations may be seen as expressing a self-organizing and self-forming intelligence intrinsic to matter itself, prefiguring more conscious and fully developed forms of human intelligence. This thesis of the original intelligence of matter is fundamental to the tradition of *Naturphilosophie* or philosophy of

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nature (see Stone 2008). But this thesis has not so far been examined with respect to its bearing on the maternal body. If maternal subjectivity is to emerge from these body relations, then they must already be significant—not an inert background from which we must break to become subjects, but rather the locus of a kind of pre-subjectivity embodied between mother and child.

It may seem that by focusing on mother-child relations and on the centrality of the maternal body to these relations, I am reinforcing the traditional norm for mothers and women more broadly to be responsible for the primary, day-to-day care of young children. On the contrary, I believe that the traditional norm for women and not men to provide primary care is unjust, to both women and men. By rethinking maternal body relations as intelligent, I am hoping, reciprocally, to make it easier to re-imagine the paternal figure as someone who gives bodily, emotional, day-to-day care to young children, rather than the traditional severe law-giver or breadwinner. To be sure, many fathers already are increasingly involved with their children practically and emotionally. But we need new ways of imagining paternity to provide support for this social change. Moreover, I believe that in an ideal social world child-caring labor would be fully shared between the sexes—not only that fathers and men would be more involved with children than they traditionally were, but that there would be a thorough-going redistribution of the material and emotional labor of child-caring such that women would no longer always be presumed to be the primary parents. I will suggest some ways to re-imagine paternity that support this goal of fully equal participation in child-caring by fathers and men.

I hope, then, to analyze maternity in a way that does not reinforce the traditional gendered division of labor but helps us to think and live beyond it. Yet I might seem, despite myself, to reinforce our association of child-care with women and not men insofar as I focus on maternal experience, on mothers' relations to their children, and on mothers' relations to their own mothers. I do not focus, to any significant extent, on fathers' experience, or on mothers' relations to their own fathers or to the fathers of their children. In concrete reality, though, fathers do affect mother-child relations in these several ways. Insofar as I neglect these ways in which fathers shape mother-child relations, my account of those relations is partial. Nonetheless, I abstract from the impact of fathers so that I can analyze mothers' relations to their children and to their own mothers in sufficient depth and detail to illuminate their intrinsic dynamics. I do not intend this methodological decision to abstract from the role of fathers to translate into a substantial claim that fathers are or ought to be merely secondary in child-caring and family life. Ultimately, my claims about the structures of maternal experience would need to be re-worked to incorporate recognition of how fathers figure into these structures. But that remains a matter for further inquiry.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

In Chapter 1, I expand on some of the perhaps rather sweeping claims of this Introduction. I examine some practical and emotional difficulties created for mothers by inherited antitheses between maternity and subjectivity. I also explore some distinctly contemporary forms of the idea that the mother is a mere background to the selfhood of others—particularly in the parenting industry and the ideals of intensive mothering that it promotes, but also in certain currents within psychoanalysis. Nonetheless, I argue that the psychoanalytic tradition remains vital for thinking about maternity.

In Chapter 2, I explore the idea—articulated by Irigaray amongst others—that, by encouraging us to separate from our mothers, Western civilization as a whole has been matricidal. I suggest that calling this civilization ‘matricidal’ is less hyperbolic than it might seem. As we learn from Irigaray, Kristeva, and other psychoanalytic theorists, separating from one’s mother is never a neutral cognitive accomplishment but is inevitably a tortuous process involving psychical violence. Before one can recognize oneself to be separate from one’s mother, one must *make* oneself separate, by repudiating the early maternal realm. Against Irigaray’s matricide thesis, one might object that mothers have been idealized rather than devalued in our civilization, such that the identity *mother* has been normative for all women. I argue that this idealization has actually gone hand-in-hand with the widespread cultural expectation that we should separate from our mothers, because the kind of mother that is idealized is self-sacrificing, enabling us to leave behind her own bodily realm.

In Chapter 3 I draw upon Kristeva’s concepts of the semiotic and the *chora* and on Donald Winnicott’s concept of potential space to suggest an alternative, non-matricidal understanding of subjectivity. On this, we become subjects in our childhood in continuity with our mothers, in a space of reciprocity and entwinement that I call ‘maternal space’. Speaking relations and language extend this space rather than requiring a break from it. On this model, we can *differentiate* from our mothers without having to *separate* from them—two concepts that have often been wrongly conflated, in the psychoanalytic tradition particularly.<sup>11</sup> To separate is to accomplish a sharp and more-or-less repressive break that—in intention at least—severs all connection; in contrast, differentiation occurs within, and thus presupposes, an ongoing space of connection.

As I have indicated, I am approaching maternal subjectivity as it arises out of the mother’s early relations to her own mother. Yet mothers do not really begin life as the gender-neutral *children* of their own mothers—they begin life as daughters. We therefore need to reconsider how daughters typically relate to their mothers. I do so in Chapter 4. Daughter-mother relationships have received considerable attention from feminist psychoanalytic authors such as Nancy Chodorow (1978) and Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1983),<sup>12</sup> but I offer an account more indebted to Irigaray and

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Kristeva. On this account, the cultural expectation that we should separate from the mother creates particular difficulties for daughters, because they must also remain identified with their mothers and with the maternal body to assume a female identity. As a result, girls typically end up split between conscious repudiation of their mothers and a kind of unconscious mergence with them. As it were, the two opposed terms—subjectivity and maternal body—become partitioned across two halves of the daughter's psyche. To be sure, daughters generally strive to break down this partition and not without success; I discuss Marguerite Duras's semi-autobiographical novel *The Lover* as an instance of this striving. Nonetheless, this striving takes place against the background of the peculiar psychological difficulties that daughters face in our culture.

In Chapter 5 I move from the daughter's to the mother's perspective. Drawing upon psychoanalytic feminism, I explore some unconscious dynamics involved in mothering a daughter. Some research suggests that typically mothers respond to their daughters with special ambivalence: mothers feel torn between a strong wish to merge with their daughters and an equally strong feeling of being constricted by their daughters' demands and wishing to break free from them. This constellation of feelings reproduces the ambivalence with which the mother, as a daughter, came to relate to her own mother. Thus, looking at the dynamics of mothering a daughter provides a way in to considering mothering as the replaying of the mother's own maternal past. Ultimately, the mother's ambivalence towards a daughter replays the mother's history of wishing to break from, yet remaining attached to, maternal body relations. Now, as Roszika Parker ([1995], 2005) has shown, maternal ambivalence need not be merely negative and destructive but can be a creative and constructive force, at least if mothers can acknowledge and harness it. Experiencing the conjunction of hatred and love, and of impulses to separate and to merge, can motivate mothers to try to integrate these forces into an enriched, more open mental structure. But since the mother's ambivalence (especially towards a daughter) revolves around her maternal past, this ambivalence ultimately motivates the mother to try to integrate that past into her consciousness, meaning, and speech. Ambivalence, then, is a powerful force propelling mothers towards a distinctly maternal subject-position, in which they make meaning from the re-animated maternal past.

In Chapter 6 I focus on the temporal structures that organize how the mother replays her maternal past. In doing so, she is remembering that past. She does so primarily at an affective, bodily, and habitual level, by re-enacting patterns of behavior and affective response that once circulated between herself and her own mother. These modes of maternal remembering generate a particular form of lived time—maternal time—that is cyclical, centering on the regular reappearance of an archaic past that cuts across time as a linear succession of moments. However, a structural feature of mothering is that the mother's past repeats itself with a difference.

Because that past is re-enacted between the mother *and her child*, the past is re-created in a new shape, adapted to the unique individual that the child in each case is. This ensures that the mother can only remember her maternal past in the light of this novel present, a present that bestows upon the past new meanings that it did not originally have. The maternal past returns, but never simply as it was.

This leads me to the theme of Chapter 7: maternal loss. Contrary to what Ann Oakley calls ‘the dominant ideology which is still that . . . a good mother is always basically content, and children are, essentially, wonderful repositories of nothing but joy for those who bear and look after them’ (Oakley [1979] 1986, 6), I suggest that loss and sorrow are intrinsic features of mothering. In particular, the mother confronts the loss of her own maternal past. Because she can relive and regain that past only in a new shape, her relation with her child embodies the reality that her past as it was, and her own mother as she once was, are irrecoverably lost. Moreover, the mother faces the painful prospect of losing her maternal past all the more as her child becomes a differentiated being and as the mother thereby gradually loses the bodily intimacy with that child within which her own maternal past had been re-created (albeit in new and different form). However, the cultural expectation that children should separate from their mothers exacerbates the pain of this process for mothers. If instead it were widely recognized that children can differentiate without having to separate, then mothers could anticipate their relationships with their children continuing even whilst their children grow up and away. Mothers would still face the loss of their initial body-to-body intimacy with their children, but this loss would be less acute than it is now. This would make maternal loss more manageable, and this would make mothers better able to let their children grow up.

# 1 From Mothering to Maternal Experience

We must give . . . new life to the mother, to our mother within us and between us. . . . We must also find . . . the words, the sentences that speak the most archaic and most contemporary relationship with the body of the mother, . . . the sentences that translate the bond between her body, ours, and those of our daughters.

Luce Irigaray, 'The Bodily Encounter with the Mother'

My aim in this chapter is to motivate and situate my concerns with the maternal body and maternal subjectivity with respect to several ideas and bodies of literature that address maternity. These include Freudian and Lacanian traditions of thought about the paternal function; psychoanalytic ideas about the good-enough mother; the rise of ideals of intensive mothering in the late twentieth century; and recent fictional and autobiographical writing by or about mothers. I shall also address some objections that might be raised against my approach to maternal subjectivity.

## I. THE PROBLEM OF MATERNAL SUBJECTIVITY

In Western civilization there has been a widespread tendency to understand the maternal body and the self in opposition to one another. Arguably, this has been the case from the beginnings of this civilization in ancient Greece and the Judeo-Christian tradition through to the present day.<sup>1</sup> There has been a persistent assumption that becoming a self requires one to separate oneself from one's early relations to the maternal body. The maternal body has repeatedly been interpreted as the background, environment, first home and container, which everyone must leave behind to become a self. Traditionally, this was a self in the sense of a full participant in the community and its organizing spiritual, political, or cultural values. The most common modern version of these assumptions is instead that one must leave the maternal body behind to become an autonomous individual subject, the author and architect of the meaning of one's experience and of the normative authority of the values and meanings to which one commits oneself.

Where it has been upheld, this requirement to separate from the mother has been taken to apply to girls and boys alike. Yet girls must in some sense also remain identified with their mothers and the maternal body so as to assume a female identity. Consequently, female selfhood and, in modern times, female subjectivity have been problematic. The same set of entrenched assumptions about the self has made maternal selfhood and

subjectivity problematic: to become a mother is to re-inhabit and become re-immersed in the field of maternal body relations, but, according to these assumptions, this re-immersion precludes one from having the status of a meaning-making self.

Some readers may object to these sweeping claims about ‘Western civilization’, thinking that this supposed unity contains too many heterogeneous strands for us to speak about it as a whole. However, despite this heterogeneity, we can identify certain influential strands and traditions within this civilization and can trace the hold they have had on our collective imagination. Let us remember that the Christian Church traditionally saw the pains of pregnancy and child-bearing as consequences of Eve’s sin. On this view, the whole field of maternal body relations was tainted by sin; by implication, spiritual value required transcendence of this field. Partly due to institutional support of this kind, and partly for psychological reasons (see Chapter 2), ideas about the need to leave the mother behind have had marked influence on our culture.

It may be objected that no philosophers or major theorists explicitly argue that selfhood requires a break from the maternal body, so that I am criticizing views that nobody has ever endorsed at a reflective level. However, my target is not so much philosophical theories of the self as prevailing assumptions that, I believe, have been embodied in our forms of social life—our *social imaginary*, at least its dominant strands (on this concept see Gatens and Lloyd 1998, Taylor 2004). These assumptions have had wide currency even though few philosophers have explicitly defended corresponding views of the self. Moreover, it may be argued—as Irigaray amongst others does—that many canonical Western philosophers have implicitly *imagined* the self in opposition to the maternal body even if they have not so theorized it, and that this imagining shapes their writings. For instance, according to Irigaray (1985a), Plato’s myth of the philosopher escaping the cave expresses a fantasy of escaping the maternal womb and, by extension, the maternal and female body.

We are dealing, then, with assumptions and imagery: not logically coherent arguments but a web of associations and pictures concerning the maternal figure—associations that can be highly tenacious, to which we can be deeply attached without realizing it. Within this web, the mother is a bodily figure who conjures up intense affects. She is seen as the figure whom one must leave behind, and hence she is assumed to be the background to the selfhood of others but not herself a self or (in modernity) a subject. In another variation on these themes, the mother is dangerous, threatening to hold us back from selfhood, to prevent us from leaving her behind.

It may now be objected that these assumptions are rather vaguely specified, and if that we look at any particular forms under which they have been held, we encounter ideas too various to be appropriately treated as a unity. Certainly, I will be discussing a wide range of ideas about the need to break away from the mother (discussions that will hopefully give substance to my

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claim that these ideas have been long and widely held). These ideas include the ancient Greek view, articulated by Aeschylus in his *Oresteia*, that one must detach oneself from the mother to become a self *qua* member or citizen of the *polis*. The Gospels suggest that one must distance oneself from the mother to become a self *qua* member of the spiritual community. The modern, more individualistic view that separation from the mother is necessary for autonomy finds expression in many recent texts by men and women, including Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs (see Chapter 4) and Hitchcock's film *Psycho* (see Chapter 2). In the twentieth century some theorists have explicitly affirmed the requirement to break from the mother—above all psychoanalysts, including Freud and Lacan. The expectation that we should separate, then, has been expressed under a series of changing interpretations, corresponding to changing interpretations of the self. Yet, varied as these forms are, we can identify them as strands of a single history.

To be sure, psychoanalysis has also spearheaded the recognition, increasingly widespread in the twentieth century, that our early relations with our mothers are central in forming our selves. Often, though, it has been thought that our mothers lay the foundations of our selves or of capacities for subjectivity which nonetheless require a break from the mother for their complete realization or exercise. For example, for Margaret Mahler, our early 'symbiosis' with our mothers enables us to become separate selves, but in doing so we leave behind this same early state of symbiosis (see Chapters 4 and 5).<sup>2</sup> For Donald Winnicott, interactive mother-child play fosters the child's relational capacities but thereby enables the child to transfer its play-relations into the wider cultural world, leaving relations with the mother behind (see Chapter 3). Thus, mothers have increasingly been recognized to mediate children's transitions from nature to culture, body to mind. But because the mother embodies this transition, it has still tended to be thought that *full* entry into culture and civilization requires us to leave behind the mother and her transitional realm.

## II. MATERNAL TROUBLES

To consider how these inherited ideas can impede mothers today from being subjects, let us look at some recent fictional and autobiographical treatments of mothering. I begin with Jane Campion's 1993 film *The Piano*. Its main character, Ada, has for no known reason been mute since she was six. When the story begins, her father has arranged her marriage to a man in New Zealand. Ada communicates with the other characters only through her daughter Flora, who translates for others her mother's entirely personal sign-language; Ada also expresses herself by playing the piano. Thus, Ada remains within the pre-verbal realms of bodily gesture and of pure affective expression, realms proper to Ada as a mother—as is indicated by the contrast with Flora her daughter, who can speak directly to others. *The*

*Piano* thus dramatizes the antithesis between maternity and meaning in a patriarchal society—its patriarchal nature being shown by Ada's treatment as an item of exchange amongst men.

But perhaps *The Piano* over-dramatizes this antithesis. Surely in general mothers can and do speak? The question, though, is whether mothers can speak in ways that articulate their particular position within maternal body relations, and can create linguistic forms and narrative structures that provide this articulation. Is there available to mothers any *distinctly maternal* speaking position? Anne Enright asks this question. 'What I am interested in', she writes in *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, 'is not the drama of being a child, but this new drama of being a mother . . . about which so little has been written' (2005, 42). In fact, much has been written about this drama, but Enright's real question is whether mothers can write about their drama *as* mothers. Thus, she continues: 'Can mothers not hold a pen? Or is it just . . . that we are all children, when we write?' Enright suggests that we all write from the position of the child who breaks from their maternal past; to re-inhabit maternal body relations is to cease being able to do this.

I suspect, as I search the room for the hunger . . . in [my daughter's] cry, that I have found a place before stories start. Or the precise place where stories start. How else can I explain the shift from language that has happened in my brain? This is why mothers do not write, because motherhood happens in the body, as much as the mind. . . . A child came out of me. I cannot understand this, or try to explain it. Except to say that my past life has become foreign to me. Except to say that I am prey, for the rest of my life, to every small thing. (Enright 2005, 47)

Grappling with the same antithesis of subjectivity and maternity, several contemporary novels depict mothers who lose their subjectivity on becoming mothers and regain it only by losing their children. As Gill Rye explores in her study of narratives of mothering in contemporary France, the pervasive theme in these narratives is not happiness but loss: of children who die young, grow up and leave home, or of whom mothers lose custody (Rye 2009). One of these narratives is Marie Darrieussecq's 1999 novel *Le mal de mer* (*Seasickness*, translated into English as *Breathing Underwater*). In this novel, an unnamed mother takes her daughter with her as she runs off to the Basque coast, leaving her husband, home, and job. A detective, hired by the husband who wants his daughter back, traces the mother and daughter. Confronted by the detective at the novel's end, the mother hands her daughter over, and the story concludes with the mother traveling to the airport to emigrate to Australia. Describing acts, sensations, and impressions rather than mental states and motivations, the novel offers no insight into the mother's state of mind at these events. Instead a watching ice-cream vendor describes the handover of the girl:

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The guy [the detective] has taken the little girl's hand. Off they go, the two of them. There was a kiss, a handshake, the woman is still here; her sorbet drips on to the ground in pink splodges . . . She comes to life now, says goodbye to him, and walks off, throwing her cornet into a wastebin. (Darrieussecq [1999] 2001, 114)

As far as we know, the mother is willing to relinquish her daughter and she emigrates with no apparent plans to remain in contact. In terms of the narrative, the handover of the daughter marks the end of the emotional crisis through which the mother has been passing, which implies that the mother accepts with relief, or at least submits to, the handover of her daughter.

What was the mother's crisis? She felt submerged in a kind of psychical fusion with her daughter. We see this in the first chapter in which the two run away and camp overnight by the sea. Pausing to buy provisions at a supermarket and leaving her daughter in the car, the mother daydreams: 'Leave the child, go out the other side, someone will find her, of course they will, and as for her—ten thousand francs, a plane ticket' (Darrieussecq 2001, 15). The mother yearns to escape. Likewise, during the night, while the daughter sleeps in the tent, the mother runs off to look at the sea, which at this point symbolizes freedom, mental space, and privacy. Yet immediately before this, in the tent, the girl's 'mother holds her so close that her buttocks are lifted slightly off the sand' (5). The mother allows no distance between them, and is so alert to her daughter's potential needs that she can barely sleep—hence her need to escape. The daughter then wakes up, afraid, and goes looking for her mother, so that when the mother returns to the empty tent:

She thought, in the forest, that she'd lost her. She was only going to look at the sea . . . And then she saw her, an elf . . . She caught her, that fragile little body ready to melt in the night air . . . thought of swallowing her, reclaiming her; making her go back inside her womb, placing her arms inside her arms, her belly inside her belly, her head inside her skull. (53)

The mother is driven to escape from her daughter so as to leave behind the mergence and loss of self that the mother nonetheless deeply desires. Selfless mergence in maternal body relations *versus* individual selfhood predicated on the rejection of those relations; the mother is caught between these alternatives.

Rachel Cusk experiences the same dilemma. In *A Life's Work*, she endeavors to regain the 'unified, capable' self that she only now realizes (or imagines) that she used to have, having lost it upon having her daughter. But she cannot recover that self, for doing so would mean leaving the baby's needs unmet, which she feels unable to do. Yet neither is Cusk made unified and capable by catering for her baby's needs, because she feels unable to abandon the former projects that gave her her earlier unity. The 'unified, capable' self, she writes,

proves elusive. Its constituents, resolutely hostile, are equally unruly. To be a mother I must leave the telephone unanswered, work undone, arrangements unmet. To be myself I must let the baby cry, must . . . leave her for evenings out, must forget her in order to think about other things. To succeed in being one means to fail at being the other. (Cusk 2001, 57)

We remember how Cusk described her exhaustion as a new mother:

In the morning I would sit up in bed, the room listing drunkenly about me, and would put a hand to my face, checking for some evidence of disfigurement: an eyebrow, perhaps, slipped down to my cheek, a deranged ear cluttering my forehead, a seam at the back of my skull gaping open. (Cusk 2001, 178)

Maternity, for Cusk, is disfigurement: the loss of the form and cohesion proper to a subject, a chaotic scrambling of body parts, with a hole in the head where intelligence formerly had its seat. The mother has sunk into an archaic field in which body parts and functions exchange places with and permeate one another—the field of early mother–child flux and interchange.

Apparently, maternity challenges (no doubt to varying degrees for different mothers) one's capacities to speak and make meaning and one's sense of being a single, unified subject. These are felt to be under threat, compromised, or recoverable only with difficulty and at the expense of other, newly acquired dimensions of life as a mother. The abilities that are threatened here may seem disparate, but they are connected by virtue of the modern conception of the subject. The subject is one who actively gives meaning to his or her experience (in speech, writing, or other modes), and who can do so only because at some level he or she identifies as the single agent performing this activity. But in becoming a mother, one ceases to be readily able to identify oneself as a single, unified agent, because one has returned in fantasy to the relational context of one's early childhood, before one achieved subjectivity by breaking from this context.<sup>3</sup> To re-enter this context is to disturb the conditions under which one's subjectivity up until now has been possible.

This picture of mothering may seem one-sided and unduly negative. What about the joys of becoming a mother; the intense, at times euphoric love of mothers for their children; the mother's enjoyment of a deeply bodily and affective relation to this dependent human being; her pleasure in discovering or re-discovering forgotten dimensions of her personality that surface in the mothering relation?<sup>4</sup> I do not deny these pleasures, but they arise from the same aspects of mothering—its bodily intensity and deep intimacy between mother and child—that equally tend to spell chaos and loss of agency on the mother's part. These aspects are attractive to mothers *and*, often, cause them difficulty. This difficulty, though, is largely an artifact

of how we are used to thinking about subjectivity and the self—although this is not to say that all the difficulties of becoming a mother stem from contingent cultural constructions; some of them are arguably intrinsic to mother–child relations, as we will see later.

### III. INTENSIVE MOTHERING

One might think that the difficulties charted by Campion, Cusk, Darriussecq, and Enright do not reflect deep-seated cultural inheritances but are peculiar to contemporary, white, middle-class mothers. Arguably, these mothers are unusual amongst women in that they are used to being treated as autonomous individuals, and so, too, in finding this status undermined when they become mothers. However, mothers of many different social backgrounds tend to experience *some* difficulty in reconciling their maternity with a sense of autonomous selfhood (for evidence, see Oakley 1980, 1986). Even if these difficulties are most pronounced for contemporary middle-class mothers, this is because these mothers have had privileged access to the modern position of autonomous subject. Their difficulties therefore *do* manifest and illustrate broader tensions between modern ideals of subjectivity and the nature of maternity.

But why have these tensions not been dissolved or reduced by the circumstances of contemporary mothering? Today in the West, few women leave the paid workforce altogether on becoming mothers; they usually continue with paid work and professional life, in which, moreover, women now participate much more extensively than they did a generation ago. Men tend to be more involved with their children and families than they used to be, and many Western countries give these arrangements some support through schemes of maternity and paternity leave and childcare provision. Why, then, would mothers continue to experience the transition to maternity in terms of a loss of self and autonomy?

Part of the answer is that it remains very largely women and not men who are the principal child-carers. In the majority of families mothers retain the primary responsibility for children, and paid child-carers remain almost entirely female. Mothers may now participate more fully in paid work outside the home, but in most households family care has not become equally shared between women and men. At the same time, parenting—that is, in practice, mothering—has come to be understood in more and more intensive, demanding ways, as requiring ‘exclusive and selfless attention to and care of children . . . based on . . . psychological and emotional capacities for empathy, awareness of the needs of others, and self-sacrifice’ (diQuinzio 1999, xiii). Mothers are increasingly expected to devote themselves exclusively to their children—at the same time that fewer mothers are in a position to fulfill this expectation. As Caroline Gatrell observes:

Despite the fact that increasing numbers of professional women are returning to work while their children are still babies, the standards by which these women are measured (and by which they measure themselves) in relation to 'good' mothering are higher than ever before. (Gatrell 2005, 61)

These standards are promoted by the parenting industry: the complex of institutions for monitoring, assessing, and intervening into the behavior of parents and the development of children, staffed by health workers, therapists, and childcare and parenting professionals and experts. This industry encompasses the myriad advice manuals and pamphlets, radio and television programs and websites, and now parenting classes, all directed towards parents and administered by professionals. One of the earliest of these professional advisors (alongside John Bowlby) was Donald Winnicott, with his radio broadcasts, addressed to mothers, on the ideal of the 'good-enough mother'. Winnicott has not always been popular with feminists, because his propagation of this ideal fed into efforts following the Second World War to return women to the home. This is particularly because Winnicott makes mothering much more demanding, and by implication time- and energy-consuming, than it had previously been taken to be. 'The good-enough mother', he claims in a paper originally published in 1953, 'starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure' (Winnicott [1971] 2005, 10). The good-enough mother thereby allows the baby gradually to come to grasp and accept the difference between its fantasies and reality, and to experience itself to be separate from its mother. The mother's task is therefore intricate and exacting.

There are ambiguities in the concept of the good-enough mother which shed light on the power relations between mothers and parenting experts. Winnicott sought merely to lend a voice to the practical, everyday wisdom of the so-called 'ordinary devoted mother', who facilitates and promotes her child's development and well-being. However, Winnicott takes it that this kind of mother acts instinctively, not from rational principles (Segal 1992, 4). Specifically, she acts from her unconscious, and it is precisely by doing so that she can assist her child towards gradual individuation. This is because each mother more-or-less unconsciously harbors ambivalent feelings towards her child—she feels love *and* hatred together, Winnicott explains in his 1947 paper 'Hate in the Counter-Transference' (in Winnicott [1958] 1975, 201–2). Her hatred prompts the mother to withdraw from her child.<sup>5</sup> Winnicott is not proposing that mothers should act on these feelings of hatred, though. Rather, if the mother can tolerate and accept her hateful feelings, then, as her child separates from her, she can (instinctively) draw on these hateful feelings to allow her to accept this separation. She is therefore good because she is good *enough*, not perfect—because she

harbors hateful, aggressive wishes towards her child, whereas a ‘perfect’ mother would never let her child go: ‘by being a seemingly good mother, she does something worse than castrate the infant’ (Winnicott, quoted in Segal 1992, 5).

Because ambivalence is difficult to deal with, the ‘good-enough mother’ remains an ideal—the ideal through which Winnicott articulates the principles underlying mother–child interactions. As Naomi Segal concludes, “‘good enough’ is not so much a reassuring minimum as an exact, indefinable measure’ (1992, 5). Thus, although Winnicott aimed merely to describe everyday mothering practice and not to *prescribe* to mothers, his ideal becomes one to which mothers aspire and by which they measure and judge themselves and one another. While ‘creating mothers as agents, Winnicott simultaneously creates them as objects for the regulatory discourse of experts’, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges conclude (1992, 21). Winnicott might have abhorred the parenting industry as undermining mothers’ confidence and with it their ability to be good enough by heeding their own instincts. Yet his work provides a major intellectual foundation for that industry.

This industry more broadly is a characteristic product of the form of power distinctive of modernity—disciplinary power, Foucault tells us (1986). This form of power operates not primarily by the prohibition of some definite and finite range of acts, but rather by normalization: all individuals are ranked and measured against an ideal norm. Paradigmatically, this measurement takes place by way of examinations; in this case, these include the regular reviews of children’s progress carried out by medical and then nursery, pre-school, and school personnel. There are developmental standards that all children are expected to reach (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim [1990] 1995, 137). Yet when children are measured, their parents—in practice, mostly their mothers—are effectively measured too, as having perhaps hindered their children’s development or advanced it less well than they might have done. Examinations generate bodies of knowledge about individuals, ranking them by their distance from ideal norms. Much of the knowledge produced by infancy researchers, for instance by the attachment theorists Ainsworth *et al.* (1978), can be viewed in these terms. Ainsworth and her co-workers rank mothers by their greater or lesser capacity to foster strong attachments in their children. Here differences amongst mothers count only as deviations from the norm. From Foucault’s perspective, knowledge of this kind is not value-neutral, but is constituted as the body of knowledge and expertise that it is by a particular distribution of power, in which mothers are monitored by experts and are expected to monitor themselves in light of the norms that these experts articulate. In the resulting culture of regulation of mothers by experts and by themselves, confidence and authority drain away from mothers to the benefit of the experts.

This body of expert knowledge about mothers is inattentive (if not indifferent) to mothers’ feelings. Mothers tend to be assessed solely in terms of

their effects on their children, as in the research of Ainsworth *et al.* *Children's* psyches and development are taken seriously; how *mothers* feel is typically considered only insofar as these feelings impact upon children. We see this approach taking initial shape, once again, in Winnicott's view of maternal ambivalence. Positively, he recognizes that mothers normally feel hatred for their children. Yet, in his account, hatred becomes a potential means of ranking mothers: the mother who can accept her hatred is better than one who cannot, and in particular she is better *for her child*—by accepting her own hatred, she can let him separate. Winnicott neglects the possibility that maternal ambivalence might benefit the mother—perhaps by helping her to retain a robust sense of difference from her child, as Renata Salecl suggests (2004, 118); perhaps by pressing her to integrate her feelings of love and hatred, as Roszika Parker (2005) argues. Winnicott also pays no attention to the felt quality of maternal ambivalence: what it is *like* for mothers to suffer starkly conflicting feelings (see Kraemer 1996).

In these respects Winnicott, and the parenting industry after him, keep alive the tendency to see the mother merely as the background to her child's developing subjectivity. Indeed, not only do many experts fail to treat mothers as subjects; they also expect mothers themselves, if they are good or good-enough, not to *feel* that they are subjects. Mothers are expected to be entirely absorbed in their children's needs and inattentive to themselves. Eva Kittay in *Love's Labor* articulates this ideal that the maternal self be, as she puts it, 'transparent' to the other's needs. For Kittay, the role of a care-giver (for a child or any dependant) is to be receptive to the dependant's needs, which requires that the care-giver 'defer or bracket [her] own needs' (1999, 51) and that her 'perception of and response to another's needs [be] neither blocked out nor refracted through [her] own needs' (52). Kittay admits that transparency is an ideal, never fully achieved, and that for carers to achieve any level of transparency, they need to be properly cared-for and supported by others in turn: because they cannot properly attend to their own needs, they need others to do this for them. In that she calls for support for care-givers, Kittay's approach is feminist. Crucially, though, she presupposes that mothers' occupation with their own emotions, responses, needs, etc., diminishes their capacity to care for others.

Winnicott theorizes a psychical basis for what Kittay calls 'maternal transparency' when he claims that mothers empathize with their children by regressing to (what he takes to be) their past states of infantile fusion with their own mothers. This regression puts the mother in the state of 'primary maternal preoccupation' which, Winnicott wrote in his 1956 paper of that name, obtains in her first weeks and months following childbirth (Winnicott 1975, 300–305). This peculiar state enables the mother to care for her child by merging emotionally with both her past maternal context *and*, simultaneously, with her child here-and-now. Because the past to which the mother regresses was one of fusion with the other, regressing into this state renders the mother utterly open (in Kittay's term, transparent)

to her child's present-day needs. The regression places the mother in what Winnicott calls a 'state of heightened sensitivity, almost an illness . . . [a state of being] preoccupied with [her] infant to the exclusion of other interests' (302).

On this view, the mother—in her first months at least—lacks the unity of an autonomous subject, instead being psychically merged with her child. In contrast, for Kant in his defining account of subjectivity, a constitutive feature of a subject is its ability to claim all its experiences as its own: 'It must be possible for the "I think" to accompany all my representations' (Kant 1929, 152, B131). The mother, as Winnicott and others see her, cannot readily claim to own her own experiences, for she cannot distinguish her self from that of the other. This picture of maternity, as complicating the sharp separation of self from other that typifies the modern subject, is not entirely false. Yet the particular way in which Winnicott, Kittay, and others flesh out this picture *is* false and potentially damaging to mothers. The idea that the mother is or should be inattentive to her own feelings is unrealistic. Becoming a mother throws up new feelings, moods, and impulses; yet just as the mother is undergoing this, she confronts ideals stipulating that she should have no such feelings. For instance, a media furor greeted Cusk's admission to feelings of anxiety, confusion, despair, and anger. In one episode, her baby 'cries. I begin to shout. I don't quite know what I am shouting, something about it being unfair, about it clearly being completely unreasonable that I should want FIVE MINUTES on my own. GO TO SLEEP! I shout, now standing directly over her cradle' (Cusk 2001, 79). As Cusk reports, for this and similar admissions, numerous newspaper columnists and television discussants accused her 'of child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness . . . ' (Cusk 2008).

I have been emphasizing the negative side of Winnicott's ideas and their legacy. But these ideas are ambiguous. Positively, against Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis in which the father is all-important, Winnicott recognizes the vital importance of the care-giving that mothers do, and not merely as meeting children's material needs but as establishing the lineaments of children's psyches. He recognizes, too, the skill and intelligence that mothers exercise in giving this care (although he partially retracts this by conceiving this intelligence as instinctive). Furthermore, Winnicott focuses on the skilful caring that *real* mothers do, whereas, for Freud, the father who organizes children's development is not simply an empirical person but an ancestral figure, half-symbolic, half-instinctually remembered. By focusing on real mothers, Winnicott underlines their status as agents with moral responsibility for their children's care. In these respects Winnicott does, after all, go some way towards recognizing mothers to be subjects in the (most standard modern) sense of intelligent, responsible moral agents.

However, Winnicott's thought here again prefigures the way that the parenting industry invests mothers with enormous responsibility for their

children (which is, arguably, part and parcel of the pattern for modern disciplinary power to craft us into responsible subjects by soliciting us to monitor and regulate ourselves). The mother acquires this huge responsibility because she is seen, in the way begun by Winnicott, as being all-important for her child's development: as being the absolute determining origin of her child's personality-in-the-making (Doane and Hodges 1992, 3). In part, this elevation in importance of the mother re-creates older imagery of the maternal body as a site of danger, for the mother is now credited with immense power to *derail* her child's development, to do harm. As minor an episode as a mother continuing a conversation with another adult without pausing to interact with her child apparently induces a 'micro-depression' in that child (Stern [1995] 1999, 131–32), while popular psychologist Oliver James alleges that month-old babies left by their mothers to cry will predictably suffer from insecurity 30 to 40 years later (James 2010). Mothers today, unlike fathers or society more broadly, are the first to be blamed when anything goes amiss with their children (as feminists have noted critically; see Eyer 1996).<sup>6</sup> Here the mother's ethical responsibility as subject assumes the particular form of a duty to avoid harming her child.

This attribution of responsibility to mothers may appeal to them, enabling them to assume a status as moral agents of which their maternity might otherwise deprive them. However, insofar as mothers here are simultaneously imagined as all-powerful and dangerous, they are also tacitly being equated with the dangerous field of maternal body relations. Consider the case of one US mother, Denise Perrigo, who was arrested on suspicion of being an unfit mother, and temporarily lost custody of her young daughter, after she tried to discuss with a community center volunteer her concern at feeling sexually aroused while breast-feeding (see Kukla 2005, 205–6). Perrigo's case was eventually dismissed, but it illustrates that, effectively, to be a fit mother, a mother is expected to control and police *herself* as the locus of maternal body relations. Mothers are to internalize the split between maternity and subjectivity by regulating and policing themselves *qua* maternal-bodied.

Although this web of normative ideas causes mothers many problems, its power, especially in its initial articulation by Winnicott, means that we cannot simply stand apart from it. We need to extricate its positive side—including the recognition of the mother's importance and intelligence—from its negative side—including the inflation of mothers' importance to their children into an all-importance that brings with it a burdensome, overwhelming level of responsibility. My strategy will be to re-emphasize the importance to the child of the *imaginary*, as distinct from the real, mother. This emphasis has its roots in the work of Melanie Klein, who foregrounded the imaginary mother against Freud's stress on the father.

For Klein, the impact of the mother's actions and affects—as expressed in her bodily gestures, habits, tones of voice—is filtered from the start by the child's individual way of receiving them in light of his or her inborn

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temperament. The child invariably perceives his mother through the prism of his fantasies, which embody and reflect the particular set of drives comprising his temperament.<sup>7</sup> Infants do not perceive their mothers simply as they are in empirical fact. Perceiving the world as it really is—following the ‘reality principle’—is a learnt ability, learnt in an initial context in which one always perceives in terms of wishful fantasies and the bodily drives that they embody. As a result, young children inevitably take up and transform their mothers’ real actions in unpredictable ways, and the same actions by mothers can have very different effects on different children (Riley 1983, 73–76).

We may add to Klein’s claims that the character of each fantasized mother is also affected by the child’s encounters with other care-givers and with cultural resources—all encountered, too, in a fantasy-laden way. Mother and child are never a sealed unit. Their intimacy is imbued with their surrounding culture from their start, in particular as the mother (and others) speak to the child, unintentionally communicating the particular networks of meaning that organize their culture. These networks are conveyed, too, by games, songs, television programs, toys, books, clothes—which are not mere atomic items but parts of networks of significance. If mothers have an enormous impact upon their developing children, then, this impact is very heavily mediated. It is therefore wrong to blame mothers for any ills their children suffer, as if mothers single-handedly bore responsibility for their children’s entire being.

One might object that this emphasis upon the imaginary mother reduces real mothers once more to a backdrop upon which their children as meaning-makers project imagined meaning. We can avoid this problem by seeing the imaginary maternal figure as being created *between* each child and each mother, through their interactions as two distinct beings (as I will suggest in Chapter 3). The mother interacts with her child and, like the child, she contributes psychical contents and affects to the figure of the imaginary mother between them. By the same token, the real mother does not exert unidirectional influence on her child; she is always one of two, two who exert reciprocal effects upon one another.

## IV. PSYCHE, SOCIAL, IMAGINARY, AND SYMBOLIC

Ideals of intensive mothering have given the opposition of maternity and subjectivity new life in the later twentieth century. There are further reasons, too, why the opposition of maternity and subjectivity has lived on into the twenty-first century. As Kelly Oliver writes:

In spite of the realities of multiple family forms—single-parent families, blended families, adopted children, lesbian parents, gay parents, communal families—and the fact that the nuclear family with father