



## Hyenas and Hymens

Vittoria Lion

*“Hyenas and Hymens” is inspired by Leonora Carrington’s short story, “The Debutante,” about a young woman who sends a hyena to her debutante ball in her place. I interpret “The Debutante” as a narrative of refusing heterosexuality and compare the hyena to Jacques Derrida’s metaphor of the hymen in “The Double Session.” For Derrida, the hymen is a contradictory space that is irreconcilable with heterosexual sex and gender norms. Similarly, hyenas are gender-ambiguous and frequently engage in homosexual behaviour. My work also references the work of Monique Wittig and Jessica Polish on lesbianism as resistance to the “domestication” of women.*

Opposite the first page of “The Debutante” is a drawing of a hyena with a human face peering into a mirror with wonderful confidence. On the dresser are a hairbrush for her coarse, spotted hide, and some makeup, perhaps. Out of view, maybe, there are slippers and a little hat. She is not neutralized; she believes that her unmistakable stench perfectly complements the dress that she will wear tonight, and she eagerly anticipates the party. What was supposed to be the allure and powerlessness of a melancholic young woman put on display becomes the hyena’s own celebration, her unveiling. In spite of—or perhaps because of—her escape from gender (for she, like all female hyenas, bears both breasts and a penis), she views the whole affair with far more ease than the person whom she is replacing (Wittig 1981, 250). The word *hyena* is similar to *hymen*; both have “slipped between” the dichotomy of virginity and penetration, to quote Derrida (1981, 225). The hymen, which is also a thin membrane covering the eyes of certain animals (Derrida 1981, 223), contrasts the marriage bed of the royal couple in Derrida’s “Des Tours de Babel” (1985, 213). A fear of spaces of contradiction made the destruction of the hymen necessary for becoming a woman.

For years, the young woman had stared at the hyena pacing behind the chain links—this spectre of femininity gone rotten, perceiving something of her own mutilated soul reflected in the animal’s movements, as Theodor Adorno glimpsed his in those of a caged tiger (Adorno 1951, 116). She had read in books that hooves and pieces of entrail glide down a hyena’s throat like slippery bath pearls, and that the animal’s stomach is a reliquary of bones. A feral shade of cayenne studies her, and she wonders if similar eyes gazed upon a Roman amphitheatre where more than one virgin martyress met the jaws of hyenas. She will join them tonight, losing her divinely-created female body to such huge teeth in a slightly different manner (neither hymens nor hyenas have a place in sacred history). Members of the species *Crocota crocuta* are known for a proclivity toward homosexual behaviour and social intelligence possibly rivalling that of the great apes; the woman knows this well, pushing scarcely read copies of the works of Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel through a hole in the fence in exchange for every word of the language of the unconscious. The animal whispers the promises of outrages into her ear. She will go to the debutante ball in her place, representing her refusal of the bifurcation of male and female. They concoct a plan, and the woman awkwardly stuffs the

hyena's calloused brown paws into white opera gloves amidst the dead maid on the floor and fresh roses on the walls. Her mother complains of the smell emanating from the room. The hyena fills herself on her victim, hides the feet in an expensive handbag, and wears the face, the eyelids overhanging her own. Her human friend is fixated by the possibility of reverse evolution into an animal, unthinkable and unspeakable to the party guests until it removes its shrivelled mask to reveal death under doilies and promptly disappears through the window: a threat so foul that Western theology and philosophy have functioned primarily as safeguards against it, but still an abomination that far too many have found themselves wondering might also be a form of redemption (Carrington 1939, 19-24).

I want to imagine another way out, another way represented by this hyena with full lips, a blushed face, her forelegs poised on the dressing-table, and her ears tilted as if recognizing herself for the first time. In "One Is Not Born A Woman," Monique Wittig claims that lesbians should not be considered "women": "The refusal to become (or to remain) heterosexual always meant the refusal to become a man or a woman, consciously or not" (1981, 248). The splitting of the hymen loses its significance. The young woman in Carrington's story becomes an "escapee" (Wittig 1981, 250) from her duty to men by symbolically transforming into an animal. One year after the publication of "The Debutante," Carrington would go mad, experiencing another rupture in the developmental process leading to healthy heterosexuality (Noheden 2014, 42-44). The psychic remainders of the world outside caused me problems, inevitably. Narratives of female insanity fly off the shelves as much now as ever, but there seems to be only one that the sideshow patrons wish to hear about: the Sylvia Plath Syndrome, the tragedy of the picture-perfect 1950s suburban housewife with two small children who complains of insomnia and fever from time to time and can't stop crying. She kills herself in her kitchen, the space that necessitated the domestication of both women and animals (Polish 2014, 180-96), narrowing the expression of their sex drives to the task of reproduction (Jones 2014, 97-98). In comparison to my bout of madness, it seems that hers was rather discrete and quiet and hygienic. Neither was Carrington's; in her autobiography, she describes her public breakdown and subsequent withering, forcibly confined to a hospital bed for days as the floorboards rotted away to reveal a basement world "down below" (qtd. in Noheden 2014, 55). Such women—if it is even proper to call them women—used to be staked down in bogs for fear that they would react to the confines of the grave with resistance (and, without doubt, their escapes would be aided by hyenas, those notorious disturbers of the dead...). It seems to me that madwomen are not women either.

One night, I dreamed that I swallowed an entire ocean whole, and tresses of knotted wrack were spilling from my lungs all over the tablecloth. Sometime in the mid-morning, I found a mouthful of fresh air, picked the kelp leaves from my skin, and strolled along the beach, transforming into a laughing hyena with a mane of cotton nightgowns torn into ribbons. I bought a subway ticket and made my way back to my house, which suddenly seemed mysterious and unrecognizable. The objects weren't fitted to my hands and were frankly useless; I found that the dried hyacinths left on my bedside table by those who feared my illness had sprouted a garden, simultaneously dead and alive, that I now curl up in. I eat a dictionary for supper, stand up on all fours, and watch the world go by.



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## Hyenas' Birthday Party

Vittoria Lion

Inspired by the human-faced hyena in Leonora Carrington's "The Debutante," *Hyenas' Birthday Party* depicts a coven of these creatures wearing vintage women's hats and gathering around a large cake with pink frosting. Hyenas are very talkative, and I imagine them chattering among themselves. Carrington's hyena announces her dislike of cake at the end of "The Debutante" (1975, 24), but mine have developed a curiosity about baked goods and pastel-coloured birthday candles. I am not sure what the contents of the cake are, and I think that it might be best if this remains a mystery. My hyenas trouble assumptions that femininity is something defined by domestic settings, indulging their fascination with pink and frills on a dark terrace bordered by cypress trees and a full moon. I can relate to them because it is still difficult for others to understand that my femininity exists outside of romantic and sexual relations with men. The hyenas' femininity, like mine, is out of context: it is something purely learned, an illustration of Judith Butler's statement that gender is "persistent impersonation" (1990, viii). My hyenas, who slip between biological classifications of sex, could not have been assigned this particular gender based on their anatomy.



Vittoria Lion, "Hyenas' Birthday Party"



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## Dionysus as a Leaping Bull

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Vittoria Lion, "Dionysus as a Leaping Bull"

In Friedrich Nietzsche's hymn, Dionysus is praised as "the genius of the heart who teaches the doltish and rash hand to hesitate and reach out more delicately; who guesses the concealed and forgotten treasure, the drop of graciousness and sweet spirituality under dim and thick ice, and is a divining rod for every grain of gold that has long lain buried in the dungeon of much mud and sand" (Nietzsche 1966, 233). *Dionysus as a Leaping Bull* is an expression of my simultaneous dread and desire for an invitation to eat (and risk being eaten) at the feast of the patron saint of madness. The food chain is reversed there: taking the form of a bull wearing garlands of flowers and bay leaves, Dionysus presides over a meal that includes a heart suspiciously similar to mine, which is swallowed by the leopard in attendance. In Tim Shaw's installation, *The Rites of Dionysus*, the mad god appears as a leaping copper bull, "a symbol of untamed nature" (Shaw 2004). No one sits down politely at this meal, and there are no utensils. This precursor to the Last Supper lacks solemnity and is filled with dancing and noise: "Gods enjoy mockery: it seems they cannot suppress laughter even during holy rites" (Nietzsche 1966,



233), Nietzsche writes. I dream of putting my hand inside Dionysus' bone bag of tricks and pulling pearls and silky gold from among tibias, ribs, and vertebrae. His madness transforms him into an animal, and to gather for his rite is to enter a nonhuman madhouse enclosed by the forest. Few notice as his magic undermines modern cities, transforming animals bred for industrial feedlots and supermarkets into incarnations of himself and transforming women dismissed as hysterical into queers who threaten the men who attempt to confine them in houses and clinics. At next year's feast, Dionysus might take the form of a tiger or another large cat who escaped from a zoo, followed eagerly by unusually hairy women. I imagine them to be descendants of the Medieval wild men of the woods, of whom I think Nietzsche was the last. They, in turn, were reincarnations of the mad god's followers in ancient Athens and Crete (Feder 1980, 293-94n28).

The maenads have lived under many different names. I recognize their faces in John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* and the women who Sigmund Freud describes showing up on his couch. I appreciate the discomfort that leads to that place. The seeds of all stirrings and uprisings are planted when we are lying sick in bed, in distressing dreams, and in slips of the tongue that spread and spread. However, I cannot shake the unsettling thought that the couch also represents an attempt to contain the maenad within the home, perhaps with one of Freud's chow chows lying across her lap in place of a leopard with a blossoming maw. The couch is too tame to fully bear the weight of my dreams; I need something else. I would rather leave the house and build a nest out of leaves, sticks, and clumps of hair in the middle of the forest.

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