The thin muslin went flaring up the chimney like a magic bird and now off came her skirt, her woollen stockings, her shoes, and on to the fire they went, too, and were gone for good. The firelight shone through the edges of her skin; now she was dothed only in her untouched integument of flesh. This dazzling, naked she combed out her hair with her fingers; her hair looked white as the snow outside. Then went directly to the man with red eyes i whose unkempt mane the lice moved; she stood up on tiptoe and unbuttoned the collar of his shirt.

What big arms you have.
All the better to hug you with.
Every wolf in the world howled a prothalamion outside the window as she freely gave the kiss she owed him.
What big teeth you have!
She saw how his jaw began to slaver and the room was full of the damour of the forest’s Liebestod but the wise child never flinched, even when he answered:
All the better to eat you with.
The girl burst out laughing; she knew she was nobody’s meat. She laughed at him full in the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own discarded clothing. The flames danced like dead souls on Walpurgisnacht and the old bones under the bed set up a terrible dattering but she did not pay them any heed.

Carnivore incarnate, only immaculate flesh appeases him. (Angela Carter, “The Company of Wolves” 118)

In this passage a little girl becomes a woman, a wife, and a savior. When she calmly “combe[s] out her hair,” when she moves “directly to the man” before her, she for the first time acts with womanly composure and deliberation. But she was always capable of developing. Unlike other children, fear of the “teeming perils of the night and forest” (111) had not shriveled her capacity and desire for play and exploration. Indeed, unlike Little Red Riding Hood (and Little Red Cap), she was the one who made the decision to venture out into the woods. Yet though she had dreamed of
having more, of being more, than the “rustic downs” (114) of her native village, when she first sensed that the desirous courtly gentleman she encountered in the woods meant her harm, her first reaction was indistinguishable from that of other folk, from that of prey. When she “pulled [her] scarlet shawl more closely round herself” (117) and temporarily allowed the wolf control over her fate, she was like the passive, pathetic young bride who “drew the overlet up to her chin and waited and [. . .] waited and [. . .] waited” (112). She was acting just like how Little Red Riding Hood, the dressed-up puppet of mothers and wolves, would. But she shows in this passage that she is not so foolish as to believe—as many “old wives” (113) did—that decorum might tame wolves as much as it might little girls. Rather than “throw a hat [. . .] at [him]” (113), she disrobes him, and her “flesh” baits—and beats—the wolf.

Though she begins the seduction by “st[anding] up on tiptoe and unbutton[ing] [his] collar” (118), this woman need not be dainty. Like the wolf who can move with facility from “delicate” (115) gestures to forceful advances, she soon “rip[s] off his shirt [. . .] and fl[ings] it into the fire.” The wolf, too, we remember, “strip[ped] off his” clothing and “flung off” (116) a blanket, and the matching of terms used to describe their actions helps make their physical and marital union seem appropriate. It is true that when she “laughed at him full in the face,” her action, in part, read as payback and revenge for the time he held dear advantage over her. While before the absurd innocence of a little girl who gazed upon the “little” compass he kept in his pocket “with a vague wonder” (114), drew him to laugh, now his inability to register that his fastidiously laid out plans have gone awry, that she may in fact be toying with him when she exclaims, “What big teeth you have!,” draws her to laugh back at him in return. But they are both too much the same (and too different from others) for this response to establish something other than their equivalence. Both draw their considerable energy from potent inner resources; both are integrally linked to the plot’s key dynamic—that of invasion and repulsion/redemption—and her laugh is linked to a greater purpose: he, with “eyes full” “with a unique, interior light” (117), is one of a company of wolves who haunt a whole world with their howling pain, and she, with a “dazzling” “integument of flesh” will, with a laugh, alleviate it.

The wolves are the story’s perpetual intruders, but the narrator ensures that no one, no thing, escapes infestation. The villagers are visited by “infernal vermin” (116). The reader is brought “[in]to [a] [. . .] region” (110), “[in]to the forest” (112), introduced to the terrifying wolves and their “rending” (110) howl, then deposited at a “hearthside” (111) and told that though “[w]e try and try [. . .] [w]e [. . .] cannot
keep [the wolves] [. . .] out” (111). Even the wolves suffer “so” (117). In a text where adjectives often infest, intensify, overwhelm, and corrupt their unfortunate “host” nouns (e.g., “acrid milk” [111], “malign door” [113], “rustic clowns” [114], and in this passage, “old bones”), the wolves, though “they would love to be less beastly” (112), are burdened by their own “inherent” beastliness. But various and indiscriminate oppression enables liberation to become more sweet, significant, and shared when it arrives. The narrator is heightening the expectation for an epochal event, an act of resistance so powerful and reverberating that it might “open” the “door” (118) to a whole new era.

The young woman, described as “a sealed vessel,” as someone possessing a “magic space shut tight with a plug” (114), is ideally constituted to repel invasions. She is the perfect person to serve as the “external mediator” (112) the “carnivore[s] incarnates” are waiting for. And in this passage, where the gathering wolves invade the room with their “damour,” where the dialogue follows the familiar pattern of folklore which leads to a wolf’s ingestion of a little girl, the young woman does not “flinch” (118). Since “flinch” is one of the innumerable words in this story (and in this passage) (e.g., “thin,” “skin,” “infinite,” “inherent,” etc) which contains within themselves the preposition “in,” her imperviousness here is set up to seem especially significant. But it is her riposte, the expulsion of her own sardonic laugh “out loud,” not her parry, which counters and disrupts the story’s predatory inward movements and inaugurates a series of paragraphs in which she “wills” (118) the action and determines the fate of a land.

In this passage all the “wolv[es] in the world” come “carol[ling]” (117) on Christmas Eve, but they do not “sing to Jesus” (111). Instead, these feral witnesses serenade the mental maturation of a young woman well suited to keep a “fearful” wolf company and to “still” and “silence” (118) the “endless” (112) suffering afflicting a “savage country” (113).

Work Cited