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# **Repainting the Lion: The Representation of Women in**

## ***Zadie Smith's *The Wife of Willesden****

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## **Abstract**

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale is one of the most provocative, debated and well-known interventions in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1483) due to its resonances with our modern understanding of female empowerment. Zadie Smith's debut play *The Wife of Willesden* (2021) is a response to and an adaptation of Chaucer's text that successfully manages to incorporate contemporary concerns about gender, sexuality and race while maintaining the essence of the original text. This dissertation aims to analyse Zadie Smith's rewriting of Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, paying particular attention to the ways in which Chaucer's feminine model in the character of Alyson inspires Smith's representation of women. This analysis is carried out with the objective of exploring the extent to which the characterisation of the Wife of Bath is able to inspire and empower contemporary women.

**Keywords:** Wife of Bath, Wife of Willesden, Geoffrey Chaucer, Zadie Smith, female empowerment, gender, postcolonialism, womanhood.





## Introduction

The medieval English poet Geoffrey Chaucer, (c.1343–1400), often referred to as the Father of English literature, is mainly known for his unfinished and canonical poem *The Canterbury Tales*. Written in Middle English between 1387 and 1400 and published in 1483, Chaucer's opera magna offers a satirical but benign portrait of 14th century English society through the voice of twenty-four pilgrims. One of the most provocative, debated and well-known interventions in *The Canterbury Tales* is the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale. Its narrator, Alyson of Bath, is known for her unapologetic and irrepressible take on female domination within marriage, her defence of sexuality, and her vindication of women's agency.

Although it cannot be claimed that Chaucer's text is feminist in the modern sense of the word, it is clear that Alyson's interrogation of gender roles deeply resonates with our modern understanding of female empowerment. With this framework in mind, it is no surprise that 600 years after her creation, Chaucer's Wife of Bath still continues to inspire responses and reinterpretations. As Turner (2021) reports, new adaptations of the Wife of Bath have continued to proliferate in recent times: "from the novel of 1978 by Vera Chapman, (...) to Julie Walters's soap-star version in the BBC adaptation (2003), to Caroline Bergvall's extraordinary reimagining of her voice, *Alisoun Sings* (2019)." (Turner: 14).

The latest reappearance of the Wife of Bath is seen in the hands of contemporary author Zadie Smith (1975-, London), who transforms Alyson into Alvita in her debut play *The Wife of Willesden*. Smith is a major contemporary British author known for her novels *White Teeth* (2000), *The Autograph Man* (2002), *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* (2012), *Swing Time* (2016), as well as for her numerous essays and short stories. Her work is characterised by a recurring engagement with Brent, the North-West London Borough

the author is from: “Everything I write is more or less about Brent” (Smith: xi). In light of this, Ulrike (2016) claims that Smith’s novels prove the author’s critical sense of both space and place, and that her fictional engagement with North London “serves as a vehicle for general observations about the state of present-day society and culture.” (Ulrike: 65). Similarly, Eagleton (2020) claims that Smith’s shorter forms are characterised by the fluidity between feeling and knowledge, which reflects Smith’s interest both in aesthetics and politics. *The Wife of Willesden* is not exception to these claims.

The idea of rewriting the Wife of Bath came as a result of Smith being commissioned to write a piece about Brent: The winner of the London Borough of Culture<sup>1</sup> in 2020. The request led her to associate the Kilburn High Road with Canterbury due to their shared history of pilgrimage, and the possibility of translating the Wife of Bath into contemporary local vernacular consequently emerged. However, it was not until Smith began rereading Alyson’s discourse with this intention in mind that she realised that this medieval fictional character had more in common with modern-day Brent than she might have initially expected. Both Chaucer and Smith were born in London, and had a keen ear for the voices in the city. As Smith explains: “from the moment Alyson opens her mouth (...) I knew that she was speaking to me, and that she was a Kilburn girl at heart. (...) For Alyson’s voice –brash, honest, cheeky, salacious, outrageous, unapologetic – is one I heard and loved all my life (Smith: xiv). Thereby, Alyson of Bath was transformed into Alvita, a 21st century North-West Londoner.

The critical reception of the play has claimed that “It’s dazzling to behold Smith’s intelligence at work in the way she’s transposed the tale.” (Lukowski, 2021) and that

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<sup>1</sup> The London Borough of Culture is a competition to bid for more than £1m of the Greater London Authority funding. It is open to all London boroughs, and it is part of the Mayor of London’s plans to make culture an integral part of the capital and its local communities. Its aim is to promote cultural initiatives that reflect the diversity of the city, that bring people together, and that make culture accessible to everyone.

“Alvita is a thrilling (and perhaps troubling) reminder of the way that the concerns of Chaucer’s medieval characters are still relevant today.” (Hanna, 2021). Indeed, Smith’s *The Wife of Willesden* is shaped both by her interpretation of Chaucer’s text and the cultural context of present-day society. In this vein, the play successfully manages to incorporate contemporary concerns about gender, sexuality and race while maintaining the essence of the original text. In fact, as Smith clarifies in the introduction of the play, *The Wife of Willesden* is “for the most part, a direct transposition of the Wife of Bath’s prologue and tale” (Smith: xvii). In this sense, it is faithful to the structure and themes of *The Canterbury Tales*, as it includes the General Lock-in, the Prologue, the Tale, and a Retraction, which have been paraphrased accordingly. Smith also writes in rhyming couplets, and although the language she uses is obviously different from Chaucer’s, she maintains his inclusive approach: “Chaucer wrote of people and for them, never doubting that even the most rarefied religious, political, and philosophical ideas could be conveyed in the language people themselves speak. I have tried to maintain that democratic principle here.” (Smith: xv). Furthermore, Smith is also interested in the resonances between medieval Canterbury and the twenty-first century: “‘Sovereigntee’ began to sound a lot like ‘consent’, for example, and Alyson’s insistence on physical pleasure not unlike the sex-positivity movement, while her contempt for class privilege feels uncannily close to our debates on that topic today.” (Smith: xvi)

Nonetheless, *The Wife of Willesden* presents an obvious and intrinsic difference that renders this play particularly interesting: Its authorship. Instead of Geoffrey Chaucer, a white medieval Englishman, it is written by a Zadie Smith, a British woman of Jamaican descent living in the twenty-first century. This leads to a series of modifications in respect of the original text, which give place to new meanings and interpretations.

The aim of this BA dissertation is to make an analysis of Zadie Smith's rewriting of Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, paying particular attention to the ways in which Chaucer's feminine model in Alyson inspires Smith's representation of women. Hence, I will discuss how Smith adapted Chaucer's text in consonance with the ideas conveyed by Alyson of Bath, while also considering the reasons she chose to make the modifications she made. This analysis will be done with the objective of exploring the extent to which the characterisation of the Wife of Bath is able to inspire and empower contemporary women.

In order to carry out this purpose, I will opt for a close reading of *The Wife of Willesden*, which will be accompanied and supported by a critical discussion of the Wife of Bath. Thus, this paper will be divided into two different chapters: Firstly, Chapter 1 will be dedicated to the Prologue; it will provide general contextual information about *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Wife of Willesden*, as well as a critical discussion of Alyson of Bath and the subsequent analysis of Alvita of Willesden. Secondly, Chapter 2 will first present Alyson's Tale together with the critical response it has received, and then Alvita's Tale will be analysed in this light. Special attention will be paid to the way Smith chose to resolve and adapt the Tale in accordance with the characterisation of the Wife seen in the first chapter.

## **Chapter 1: The Prologue**

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a frame narrative or frame tale: It uses the idea of pilgrimage as a literary device to encompass many tales, narrated by diverse people, within a larger story. The frame story of the tales is established in the General Prologue, in which Chaucer describes a group of pilgrims travelling from Southwark to

the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The framed stories are those that the pilgrims decide to tell as part of a story-telling contest, and they generally consist of a prologue and a tale. Although Chaucer's original intention was initially much more ambitious, he managed to complete twenty-four tales, in which he uses the pilgrim's self-ignorance and personalities to compose a social satire. Nonetheless, Chaucer is not harshly critical with his characters, and the tales have no overt morality. Instead, he seems to be interested in creating a portrait of the changing society of his time. Of the twenty-four tales that configure this social portrayal, only three are narrated by women, and the only secular female voice comes from Alyson, the Wife of Bath.

The Wife of Bath's story is the only one we find in Zadie Smith's *The Wife of Willesden*. Yet, just as Chaucer uses the literary device of pilgrimage to bring together a very diverse group of people, Zadie Smith uses the borough of Brent for the same purpose: "We had all types of people in that night, / Young and old, rich and poor, black, brown and white – / But local" (7). The play begins in the Colin Campbell pub, where Brent's year as the London Borough of Culture is being celebrated. The pub is crowded and there is a sense of elation, and the publican, Polly Bailey, suggests a lock-in and a story telling competition. This gives place to Alvita taking the central stage and recounting her life story. However, in contrast with the Wife of Bath, Alvita's voice is not the only one reciting the story of her Prologue, as she is accompanied by the punters of the Collin Campbell pub, who help her bring her story to life:

She's not alone. The monologue has expanded into a play in which Chaucer's quick descriptions are made into tiny snapshots. The dodgy Pardoner becomes a charity bucket collector. When holy men – Jesus among them – are cited, they appear with brassy haloes made from golden metal trays held behind their heads. Everything is on-the-hop, vivacious. (Clapp, 2021)

However, it is not clear “whether the words they speak are their true thoughts and feelings, or whether Alvita manipulates them into relaying her version of events, telling the story she wants to tell.” (Greenwood, 2021: 6)

The present chapter will be concerned with the Wife of Bath’s and the Wife of Willesden’s Prologue. In Chaucer’s text, the Prologue is the part in which Alyson provides context for the Tale, and it can be divided into two parts: First, she proclaims herself as an authority on marriage and sex and offers her views on the topic. Secondly, she describes her experience as a wife and gives an account of the five husbands she has had. Smith’s text follows the same structure as Chaucer’s, and Alvita deals with the same topics. The following subsections of this chapter will be respectively devoted to the analysis of the feminine model Chaucer creates in Alyson of Bath and the subsequent response it inspires in Smith, as seen in her configuration of Alvita of Willesden.

### **1.1. The Wife of Bath**

When Alyson of Bath is first introduced in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, she is defined as a fashionable and ostentatious woman: At church she exhibits a ten-pound headkerchief, and on pilgrimage she wears red stockings and new shoes: “Hir hosen weren of fyn scarlet reed, / Ful streite yteyd, and shoes ful moyste and newe.” (l.456-7), together with a hat that is “As brood as is a bokeler or a targe” (l.471). Her clothes are not appropriate for a religious event, but being the only secular woman in the pilgrimage, it seems to be implied that her motives are not spiritual. She is gap-toothed, “Gat-tothed was she” (l.468), which in the Middle Ages connoted lust, and it is clearly stated that she has had five husbands and multiple partners: “Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve, / Withouten oother compaignye in youthe –” (l.460-1). Therefore,

through this introduction, Chaucer seems to be implying that she is not motivated by religious devotion but by the intention to meet men and find her sixth husband.

When Alyson is given a voice in her Prologue, she begins by declaring that she needs no authority other than her own experience to talk about marriage: ““Experience, though noon auctoritee / Were in this world, is right ynogh for me” (l.1-2). She then proceeds to use this experience “to counter and correct the ideal of subordinate wifhood painted by the ‘auctoritee’ of clerical writers” (Carruthers, 1994: 21-2). She thus questions, through a loquacious speech, the validity of medieval patriarchal and clerical ideals, and she appears to defend women’s freedom, sexuality, and agency. However, she claims that her intention is only to amuse: “myn entente nys but for to pleye.” (l.192), and she contradicts herself both with her behaviour and the misogynistic ideas she presents: “Deceite, wepyng, spynnyng God hath yive / To wommen kyndely, whil that they may lyve.” (l.401-2).

Nevertheless, the Wife “anticipates one of the most vexing questions in modern feminist criticism: women's inheritance of a predominantly masculine literary tradition.” (Martin, 1996: 6). When questioning the way women have been depicted in written forms, Alyson formulates one of her most memorable questions: “Who peyntede the leon, tel me who? / By God, if wommen hadde writen stories, / As clerkes han withinne hire oratories, / They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse / Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.” (l.692-6). With this image of the painted lion, she draws attention to the inequality between men and women in their written portrayals, and she thus “turns to the question of origins, asking from where certain opinions derive and questioning the status of those who hold them.” (Scala, 2020: 108)

When it comes to the critical response the Wife of Bath has received, critics tend to offer either of two contradicting views. On the one hand, Alyson can be understood as



an attempt to defend women against the misogyny of her times, as she questions the validity of negative female stereotypes by dismantling the patriarchal assumptions they derive from. On the other hand, some scholars argue that the Wife is an ironic embodiment of the anti-feminine, misogynistic stereotypes she rejects, and that she consequently perpetuates negative portrayals of women. In accordance with the latter point of view, D.W. Robertson argues that Alyson is nothing more than an ironic portrait of the medieval wicked wife: “Alisoun of Bath is not a “character” in the modern sense at all, but an elaborate iconographic figure designed to show the manifold implications of an attitude” (Robertson, 1962: 330). In contrast, Scala (2020) claims that the Wife of Bath is more than just a reflection of misogynist beliefs, and that her role in *The Canterbury Tales* is “attempting to destroy the clerical “auctoritee” that has brought her into being.” (Scala: 109). Similarly, Dinshaw (1989) argues that the Wife reveals the inner workings of the patriarchal ideology by assuming the positing of the Other, and that in doing so she expresses a desire for patriarchal reformation: “The Wife of Bath's Prologue thus renovates the patriarchal hermeneutic to accommodate the feminine” (Dinshaw: 126). Finally, Carruthers (1994) remarks that the Wife is no feminist, “whether pre-, proto-, retro-or anti-” (Carruthers: 41). Yet, she brings attention to the power Alyson has as a fictional character, and to the impossibility of silencing her: “The newness of Chaucer's Wife as a literary text lies in the fact that such power has been given to a female voice, without any effort on Chaucer's part to shut her up.” (Carruthers: 42).

The problem with these irreconcilable readings is, as Rigby (2000) argues, that there is enough and convincing evidence to support both points of view. In order to establish some middle ground to the discussion, Rigby presents the dangers of interpreting a medieval text according to modern views, and thus compares the Wife of

Bath to Christine de Pizan, “the most forthright and systematic feminist thinker of the day.” (Rigby: 139):

Christine's work is an example of what a serious defence of women would have looked like when offered by a writer with a similar intellectual and cultural background (...) to that of Chaucer. Christine's defence of women thus provides us with a standard by which to judge the Wife's behavior and with which to assess the seriousness with which we are supposed to receive Alisoun's attack on clerical misogyny. (Rigby: 139).

Rigby concludes that Christine de Pizan would have not agreed with the Wife of Bath's behaviour and opinions, and that she is thus problematic according to not only the standards imposed by male authority but also the feminist moral principles of the time. Therefore, according to Rigby, it would be a mistake to be persuaded by a literal, rather than ironic, reading of the Wife of Bath's defence of women. The following subsection of this chapter will analyse how Zadie Smith chose to adapt the Wife of Bath and how she deals with the contradictions inherent in this character from a female and modern perspective.

## **1.2. The Wife of Willesden**

Zadie Smith defines Alvita as Alyson's “half-sister” (Smith: xviii): a Jamaican-born British woman in her mid-fifties that shares with Alyson all her feistiness. She is “triumphantly embodied” (Clapp, 2021) by Clare Perkins, and introduced in the play as someone who has a story worth listening to, and someone who, like Alyson, has the experience of having been married five times. She is also gap-toothed, which she links with Madonna, and she claims it to symbolise “passion” and to be “cute” (55). Moreover, she wears “a big Zulu hat”, a tight skirt “that shows her shape”, and shoes “that will hurt / You if you're on her way.” (11). In short, she is “Dressed to impress.” (11), and she

openly admits that she would like to find a sixth husband: “I’m up for Number Six / Whenever, wherever he feels to pitch / Up” (19). Nonetheless, she is also presented as compassionate, and she appears to be in search of love: “She’s not just fierce / Though. She’s sweet and wise. Cupid’s dart has pierced / Her so often, she’s an expert on love.” (11).

As it has already been said, Alvita’s Prologue follows the same structure as Alyson’s; She begins her defence of female sexuality and remarriage by interpreting biblical texts in a manner than suits her interests: “Alvita makes a compelling case for people to follow their desires, which are surely created by God, without guilt or apology. She calls on the Pastor, St Paul and even Jesus to interpret the bible in favour of her thesis.” (Greenwood, 2021: 7). She then describes the relationship she had with her five husbands, and in doing so she uncovers and denounces common misogynistic behaviours. Thus, the whole of Alvita’s discourse seems to be directed against the ideology of the Church and the patriarchy, the two belief systems that might oppress her and restrict her freedom: “Lawd! The patriarchy! It’s like I’m caught / In a trap and it’s all you own damn fault!” (47).

When comparing Alvita to Alyson, Smith states that “The words may be different but the spirit is the same” (Smith: xv). In this manner, Alyson’s desire for ‘sovereigntee’ is translated as consent and agency in Alvita’s speech, and her insistence on physical pleasure is understood in terms of current sex-positivity discourses. Moreover, Smith refers to modern notions as Slut-shaming: “Please don’t use, my brother, / One type of woman to cuss another. / We are all sisters.” (41), and victim-blaming on the part of men: “You ask for it. The fact / Is, it’s your fault.” (35) when adapting Alyson’s concerns. Lastly, special attention is paid to Alvita’s fifth husband, Ryan, due to his physical abuse: “he was the worst. He’d get physical with me” (50), and his love for misogynistic

literature. Just like Jankyn, Alyson's fifth husband, Ryan tortures Alvita by reading from a collection of books that strongly promotes hate towards women. However, instead of medieval misogynistic texts, Ryan's collection contains equivalent books written by twentieth-century authors: "These are books that package up women-hating for modern times – a bleak reminder that feminism still has a lot of work to do, that problems identified in the fourteenth century have not yet been solved." (Turner 2021, cited in Greenwood 2021: 19). Moreover, the play also includes other modern forms of culture transmission, as seen in the "anti-wife / Online memes" (66) that Ryan texts Alvita.

Nevertheless, in her account of her experience as a wife, Alvita also reveals the ways she deceives, manipulates, and lies to her husbands in order to gain the upper hand: "You've got to treat them mean / To keep them loving humble and keen." (33). She also confesses that while she was still married to her fourth husband, she had already secured the fifth, revealing in this manner her practical, economic, and selfish motivations. Furthermore, she claims that "Women are good at lying!" (44), and "She plays up to stereotypes of over sexualised women; as 'gold-diggers', deceitful and out to exploit men in order to get what they want." (Greenwood: 8). This puts into question the extent to which we are supposed to rely on her narration and support her world view, but it seems improbable that Smith meant her play to be an ironic portrait of women, as Chaucer's intention might have been.

Instead, Smith's underlying intention might be that of giving voice to a traditionally silenced subject. In her depiction of Alvita, Smith is inspired by real women that might be found in Brent, "I can only write down what I hear..." (12), which means that she puts a fictional black woman from Brent in a central position and gives her the freedom and power to speak and recount her experience. She gives her a voice, and we might or might not agree with what she says, but it seems to be implied that she does not

need to be morally impeccable to be listened to: “For real, now, / Them rules are for the girl who feels that she’s / Perfect. And that blatantly isn’t me.” (25). According to Smith,

Alyson shares with my own Alvita (I hope!) a starting indifference to the opinions of others and a passionate compulsion to live her own life as she pleases. She has nothing to hide. Her desire to dominate men she freely admits; her own occasional hypocrisies she does not disguise; her insatiable appetite for life she announces to all. (Smith: xvi-xvii)

Nonetheless, a significant deviation from Alyson’s speech is the purpose with which she utters it, as Alvita’s intention is not “to pleye” (l.192): “I’m using my *time*, / My *precious* time, to help needy men / Like you, not to make total fools of them / Selves in marriage. That is my mission.” (30-1). In addition, Alyson asks her audience to “taketh not agrief of that I seye” (l.191), which contrasts with Alvita’s “please don’t take the huff – / Or get offended; don’t be *that* guy... / I might take the piss – but I’ll tell no lies.” (31). Therefore, in Alvita we might find an honest denunciation of the misogynistic behaviour that Alyson articulated 600 years ago and that is still present in the twenty-first century.

## Chapter 2: The Tale

After the longest Prologue in the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath proceeds to tell her Tale. This is set in the days of King Arthur, in a fictional and magical England populated by fairies and elves. It is noteworthy that Chaucer chose for Alyson to set her tale in Arthurian England, and consequently retell an Arthurian romance, as it is “a genre that would seem to uphold many of the social priorities her Prologue otherwise overturns” (Scala, 2020: 116). In this respect, Esher C. Quinn (1984) argues that the Wife’s tale is highly ironic, as it intends to mock, rather than praise, the knightly class. Thus, its irony resides in its narrative voice, as it presents “a female and a bourgeois perspective on a genre traditionally male-oriented and aristocratic” (Quinn: 217).

The deviance from and deformation of the knightly tradition can be seen from the start, as Alyson's story begins when a young knight of King Arthur's court, defined as "a lusty bachelor" (l.883), rapes a maiden he sees walking by a river. It is significant that the initial action of the tale is rape, as it is not only a dishonourable and improper act for a knight but also "a particular crime against women and their bodily sovereignty" (Scala, 2020: 116). In this regard, Biebel-Stanley (2007) states that the rape represents "the imbalance of power between the sexes in male-dominated society", and she brings attention to the "textual absence of the maiden's direct speech", which "is symbolic of the way the voice of woman disappears in patriarchal society" (Biebel-Stanley: 75). However, as the tale progresses, women's sovereignty increases, and the rapist knight goes through a journey of corrective punishment and ultimate learning.

The reason why the knight is not condemned to death for his offence is that "the queene and other ladyes" (l.894) ask for the command over his life, and it is precisely "through the queen's intercession for mercy that the reformation process of the rapist begins" (Biebel-Stanley: 76). As Tony Slade (1969) claims, "In the Wife's eyes it is the domination of the man over the woman which is the knight's real offence, and it is for this that he has to undergo his test." (Slade: 244). Hence, the queen decides that the knight shall keep his life if he can tell her "What thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (l.905) within a year and a day.

In order to find the answer, the knight departs on a quest that eventually leads him to an old and ugly woman who assures him that if he promises to do the first thing she demands of him, she will give him the answer the queen wants: "'Plight me thy trouthe heere in myn hand," quod she, / "The nexte thyng that I requere thee, / Thou shalt it do, if it lye in thy myght, / And I wol telle it yow er it be nyght.'" (l.1009-12). Hence, the knight makes his promise, and they return to the court on the agreed day. In this way, he

becomes dependent on the old woman, and by abandoning the forest and going to the court, “Feminine power [...] moves into the realm of masculine civilization.” (Biebel-Stanley: 77). Once the knight gives his answer to the queen: that “Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above.” (l.1038-40), his life is spared.

However, since he made a promise to the old woman, his life is still dependent on her, and when she asks that he marries him, he is forced to do so, losing, in this way, his body sovereignty: “Taak al my good and lat my body go.” / “Nay, thanne,” quod she, “I shrewe us bothe two!”” (l.1061-2). Thereby, Chaucer choses to use the literary motif of the Loathly Lady in the Wife’s Tale: “a narrative of a knight compelled by necessity to marry a disgustingly old and decrepit woman in order to save his life.” (Scala, 2020: 116). Yet, the irony resides, as Esther C. Quinn (1984) explains, in the role reversal this scene implies, as it is the damsel who rescues the hero and not the other way around. From this perspective, “Chaucer is parodying the romance pattern in which the hero’s rescue of the damsel entitles him to her hand.” (Quinn, 1984: 215).

On their wedding night, seeing that the knight is repulsed and disturbed, and after giving a speech on the true meaning of gentility and the advantages of having a wife that is old and poor, the old woman gives him a choice: she can remain old and ugly and be a good and faithful wife, or she can become young and beautiful but be unfaithful to him. When the knight answers, he proves that he has learnt his lesson by yielding sovereignty to her:

My lady and my love, and wyf so deere, / I put me in youre wise governance; /  
Cheseth youreself which may be moost plesance / And moost honour to yow and me  
also. / I do no fors the wheither of the two, / For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me.  
(l.1230-5)

In response, the old woman rewards him by turning into a young and beautiful woman who will be faithful and good to him. Moreover, she gives him his sovereignty back:

“And she obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng.”  
(l.1255-6).

It has been critically noted that, while most of the attention of the Tale has been set on the establishment of the old woman’s sovereignty, she gives it up the moment she obtains it, and that “this way of behaving most emphatically does not agree with the Wife of Bath’s views on wedded bliss, as set forth in her prologue and repeated in her epilogue” (Malone, 1962: 483). Given that Alyson of Bath would not give up her position of power, the Tale contradicts the ideas she presents in the Prologue: “While the Wife professes independence and a love of female “sovereigntee,” she tells a tale in which a knight is ultimately rewarded for violence against a woman” (Wollstadt, 2007: 200).

Furthermore, it has also been noted the contrast between “the dominance of the lady over her victim while she kept her loathly shape, and her obedience to his wishes and fulfilment of all his desires when she shifted her shape and became young and beautiful” (Malone: 483). In this vein, Ellen Caldwell (2007) argues that there is little to no female sovereignty in the Wife of Bath’s Tale, given that the old woman loses her power, and reverts to the traditional role of wife, when she turns beautiful. In this manner, her power and authority seem to be linked to an unfeminine state: “Generally, it is only when she is loathsome and “ungendered” (i.e., freed from the female role), that the Loathly Lady is beyond male control and is sought after, not as a sexual object but as the source of special powers.” (Caldwell: 236).

In *The Wife of Willesden*, Zadie Smith follows the same structure and includes the same themes as Chaucer. As she claims, “even the act of sexual violence that sits shockingly at the centre of her tale – and the restorative justice Alyson offers as a possible example of progressive punishment – read, to me, as absolutely contemporary.” (Smith: xvi). However, she introduces modifications that alter the Tale in significant ways: firstly,



she adapts the end in a way that the old woman does not become canonically young, beautiful, and feminine, but rather she becomes Alvita, the Wife of Willesden. Secondly, she changes the location of the events, moving the Tale from Arthurian England to eighteenth-century Jamaica. These two changes and their implications will be respectively explored in the following subsections of this chapter.

## **2.1. She Was as Lovely as She Was Young**

In Zadie Smith's theatrical adaptation of the Tale, instead of a knight we find a young maroon boy, and the woman that saves and eventually marries him is referred to as the Old Wife. Yet, the dynamics of the story are the same as in the Wife of Bath's Tale: she is defined as an ugly "muss-muss woman" that resembles a "foul, troll-like, old Obeah woman" (87), and she progressively gains sovereignty over the maroon boy, until he completely submits to her: "I'll put myself in your hands – you decide." (102). However, as it has already been said, one of the innovations that distances Smith's version from the original is the end of the Tale: instead of transforming into the beautiful and young woman from Alyson's tale, the Old Wife swaps places with Alvita, a black woman in her mid-fifties that radically contradicts the medieval ideal of "milky whiteness" and "golden hair" (Brewer, 1955: 258).

In this vein, the maroon boy, like the knight, is eventually rewarded and pleased in spite of his crime: "His heart was so uplifted by her charms. / He was all over her... simply obsessed..." (104), but the object of his satisfaction does not symbolise submission to male supremacy and desire, as it was the case in Wife of Bath's Tale. Instead, the feminine model Alvita proposes, as seen in the Prologue, is one based on the defence of female governance and the refutation of gender-based expectations. In her Tale, she remains as she is: middle-aged, black, outspoken, vain, and lustful, and these

are qualities that are presented as desirable, as she does not have to change in order to please herself and her husband.

Moreover, when the Old Wife changes places with Alvita, Chaka Khan's 'I'm Every Woman' starts playing and she promises the maroon boy that she will be every woman to him: "I swear I'll be every woman to you" (103). Although it might not be what Alvita explicitly means, this emphasis on being every woman could be implicitly symbolic of how she might stand for all women, not just those that represent conventional feminine values or that fit into traditional beauty standards. This intersectional approach to women might be seen in the way Alvita defines her beauty: "Beyoncé look dry / Next to me. Jourdan Dunn an old skinny / Bird next to me. I outshine Naomi." (103). By claiming that the epitome of black female beauty is nothing compared to Alvita's "*fabulous, thick, middle-aged beauteousness*" (103), Smith might be elevating the common black woman – a woman that could be easily found in the streets of Brent – to a new beauty ideal. This is proven right at the end of Alvita's speech: "And if you discover I tell a lie / My life is yours: I'm not afraid to die." (103). Given that she does not die, and that Darren is described as delighted when he sees her, we can conclude that in the context of the play, she is not lying. This might give place to a new question: why could not an ordinary black woman be the new beauty ideal? From Zadie Smith's perspective, it seems that Alvita is just as valid (if not more) as traditionally accepted beauty models.

In addition, the fact that Alvita is in her fifties entails that she and her younger and compliant husband embody the antithesis of the conventional marriage. Traditionally, it is the husband who is older, and according to the Christian ideal, the wife should be obedient and meek: "wives, be subject to your own husbands" (Peter 3:1). This contraposition resonates with the already mentioned role reversal seen in the Wife of Bath's Tale: that of the damsel rescuing the hero. In this vein, Smith seems to maintain

and contribute to the theme, not to parody the Arthurian romance tradition, as it might have been Chaucer's aim, but maybe to reflect an interrogation of gender stereotypes.

In light of this, it is also important to analyse the way Smith altered the lines that describe the Wife's behaviour after her transformation. In the original source, Chaucer chose to use the verb 'to obey', as seen in "she obeyed hym in every thyng" (l.1255), which conveys that her will and her actions are tied to and conditioned by her husband's authority. In response to this, Smith decided to substitute it by the verb 'to do': "did the sorts of things he liked" (104), a gentler alternative that can imply free will. Moreover, in Chaucer's text, it seems that the wife actions are solely directed towards the enjoyment of her husband: "doon hym plesance or likyng." (l.1256), while Smith's is more concerned with shared benefits: "And brough nothing but pleasure to their life." (104).

Another textual difference that distances Smith's text from Chaucer's is that the submission of the maroon boy is repeated and therefore emphasised after his wife's transformation: "He submitted – and she was his the rest / Of the time." (104). Thereby, he remains subordinate to her, and as a result, she becomes an agreeable and delightful wife. However, this does not seem to imply that she loses her will or identity, but rather that they have a fairer and more mutual agreement that renders both happy. Finally, it is also worth mentioning that the stage directions in the final scene seem to hint towards the idea that Alvita does not lose her power over her spouse: "*some of ALVITA's descriptions of what happens next seem almost like magical commands that impel him to act as she says he did.*" (103).

All in all, Zadie Smith's adaptation of the end of Wife of Bath's Tale would be more in consonance with the ideas presented in the Prologue. The contradiction there exists between the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale is solved, given that in *The Wife of Willesden*, the end of the Tale parallels that of the Prologue. Moreover, by choosing to

substitute the young and compliant wife of Alyson's Tale by Alvita of Willesden, Smith's Tale presents a feminine model that is more inclusive and that challenges traditional ideas of feminine beauty, gender roles and stereotypes, and male dominance within marriage and society.

## **2.2. Queen Nanny and Maroon Jamaica**

Marion Turner describes (2021), in her review of Smith's play, the change in the atmosphere that can be experienced from the audience when the Prologue ends and the Tale begins: "mist rises as we are transferred to eighteenth-century Jamaica, ruled over by Queen Nanny" (Turner: 14). This switch of location entails that Chaucer's ironic Arthurian Romance is replaced by something quite distinct: a tale that is located in a world where a liberated black woman reigns. Therefore, the change goes in accordance with the depiction and characterisation of Alvita, who, according to Smith, has little to do with King Arthur: "Try as I might, I couldn't imagine Alvita using King Arthur as a point of reference." (Smith: xviii).

Queen Nanny, introduced in the play as "Famed rebel slave and leader of peoples" (75), is "the most important female figure in the history of the liberation struggles in Jamaica" (Shepherd, 2006: 1576). The historian Karla Gottlieb (2000) explains that despite the lack of reliable evidence, it is widely accepted that Nanny was born in present day Ghana and later transported to colonial Jamaica. It is said that she was married but never had children of her own, and that she lived from the 1680s to the 1750s. Nanny is famous for leading the Windward Maroons, a community of liberated slaves she set up in the Blue Mountains, in their fight against the British authorities: "She was the "military, religious and cultural leader of the Windward Maroons during the height of their resistance against the British" (Gottlieb: xvi).

It is important to emphasise that Nanny “combined the private role of wife with the public roles of priestess, community organizer, military strategist, guerrilla leader, wartime negotiator, and peacetime political leader” (Dessima, 2006: 1819), and that her “power and authority transcended that of all the known male leaders of her group” (Brathwaite 1976, cited in Gottlieb 2000: xvii). Therefore, Nanny was not relegated to the private sphere, and she transcended gender stereotypes with her powerful leadership against British colonialism. With this in mind, Ronald Cummings (2012) examines the representation of Nanny as a figure “that prompt[s] a recognition of masculinities outside the context of male bodies” (Cummings, 2012: 129). This resonates with Alvita’s (and Alyson’s) rejection of traditional gender norms and the interrogation of gender binaries they represent: “The shock never ends / When women say things usually said by men...” (12).

Moreover, Cummings also argues that male masculinities are often constructed in direct contrast with female masculinities, and that the latter are “in turn rendered as imitations or described through images of the grotesque” (Cummings, 2012: 130). These claims are reminiscent of the idea of fragmented truth presented in the Prologue: a story will always be conditioned by the views of whoever tells it, the subject of the tale, not the object: “Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?” (l.692). This bias is also seen in the depiction of Queen Nanny when she is described by white, male, British authorities: “The British written depictions of Nanny are also grossly exaggerated, and mostly described with negative and racist connotations. Usually she is depicted as a savage, bloodthirsty murderer who killer for pleasure.” (Gottlieb: xviii). Therefore, both Nanny and Alvita are subject to being understood or represented according to negative stereotypes that come from the oppressor.

Furthermore, most of what we know about Queen Nanny nowadays proceeds from oral transmission, which entails that our account of her life is a mix of factual information and myth. In this regard, Jenny Sharpe (2003) claims that “The story of Nanny is the story of contending forms of knowledge: written versus oral histories, colonial versus national cultures, institutional versus popular ways of knowing.” (Sharpe: 2). For this reason, Nanny seems to be a more adequate referent for Alvita’s Tale, given that she symbolises alternative ways of knowing, which echoes the Wife’s defence of experience as a source of knowledge. Moreover, her presence in the play reflects an engagement with current debates about the polyphony of English culture and identity. As Turner (2021) states, “The play suggests that in thinking about British identity, sugar plantations are as relevant as the imagined Arthurian past; Black stories matter as much as white versions of events; dialect needs as much attention as received pronunciation; herstory is as important as his-story.” (Turner: 15)

All in all, Smith might have chosen to locate Alvita’s Tale in eighteenth-century Jamaica due to the significance of Nanny and the Maroons as a universal model for resistance to oppression: “Queen Nanny’s story is significant and critical for serious study, for it can be used as a model to empower people of colour, women, and all who struggle against oppression.” (Gottlieb: 87). Moreover, the setting of the Wife of Willesden’s Tale also offers an inclusive approach to British culture and identity, as it puts in a central position a traditionally disregarded voice. Finally, by using Queen Nanny as a point of reference, Alvita’s Tale might reflect her wish for a world where a woman that shares her same values reigns, or, at least, a world where women are respected, valued, and considered equal to men.

### 3. Conclusions and Further Research

This BA dissertation has sought to analyse and interpret Zadie Smith's theatrical rewriting of one of the best-known and debated stories in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: The Wife of Bath Prologue and Tale. Through this analysis, it has been shown that Smith's adaptation, *The Wife of Willesden*, successfully manages to echo Alyson of Bath's arguments, opinions, and behaviour while sounding completely contemporary and modern. In addition, the subtle but significant changes Smith includes in her play have also been analysed in order to assess their role in the overall interpretation and message of the text, which might considerably deviate from Chaucer's intentions with his Tale.

All in all, it seems that at the heart of *The Wife of Willesden* lies a desire to give voice to those that have been historically silenced and oppressed. Zadie Smith presents a prologue in which a black British woman in her mid-fifties is put in a central position to freely speak her mind, and a tale in which a rebel Jamaican woman reigns. Thus, the focus of the play seems to be on the importance of listening to what women have to say, something Alyson would undoubtedly agree with. Moreover, Smith's play also introduces postcolonial concerns, as it celebrates the diversity of the people of Brent, and questions the origins of British identity, the validity of oral stories and the ambiguity of written ones. Therefore, *The Wife of Willesden* goes beyond white male metanarratives and offers an intersectional approach to women.

Nonetheless, *The Wife of Willesden*, not unlike Chaucer's Wife of Bath, remains an ambiguous and complex work. A possible line of further research would be to study Alvita's concerns and references in the Prologue more thoroughly, and to explore Smith's treatment of gender performativity and female masculinities. Instances of this are seen in the way Alvita's argues and behaves, as well as in the referent she chooses for her tale:

Queen Nanny of the Maroons. It would be interesting to analyse how this relates to contemporary theories about gender more in-depth.

On a final note, the fact *The Wife of Willesden* is so closely based on the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale and results in a play that sounds and looks completely contemporary demonstrates that many medieval misogynistic issues are still significant and recognizable nowadays. We cannot affirm that the Wife of Bath is a feminist creation with which Chaucer meant to provide a serious defence of women, but Zadie Smith has proved the ways in which this medieval fictional character is still relevant and able to inspire and empower women today.



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