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**Abstract**

This paper studies the co-articulation of the transhistorical issues of gender, race, and sex in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and Zadie Smith's debut play, *The Wife of Willesden*. It argues that despite an over 600-year gap, the medieval text and its recent adaptation invoke similar forms of sexual assault and feminine abuse while undermining analogous abstractions and ideological conjectures of anti-feminism: Jamaican-born Londoner Alvita and her medieval foil Alisoun of Bath uncover the ingrained myths of Western phallocentrism and wittily discredit its claims. This paper also examines Smith's generic and cultural remodeling of the source text and the linguistic and aesthetic interventions she uses to shift a canonical medieval all-white text to a contemporary globalized and transnational London.

## Introduction

Six hundred years after his death, Geoffrey Chaucer "continues to make meaning" inside and outside the academy (Forni 2013, 17). Chaucer's circulation in the cultural imagination, his inclusion in secondary and higher educational curricula across the globe, and the countless adaptations of his texts attest to his continued relevance as a cultural product. His "cultural capital" is refashioned in a variety of forms—paintings, performances, adaptations in print, on stage, and on screen (Barrington 2007, 3). It is reinvented, repurposed and resituated in new environments, reaching new audiences and addressing new questions. At once "the progenitor of the British literary heritage and a contemporary whose voice transcends time" (Barrington 2007, 7), Chaucer continues to live, and his work remains relevant in the twenty-first century.

Alisoun of Bath, perhaps Chaucer's most memorable and most intriguing character, is almost a metonymy for Chaucer himself. Her life extended well beyond the fourteenth century and her influence and regenerative capacity are extraordinary. She "exceeded her own text" (Turner 2023, 2), reemerging in different artistic forms and at different times. Her witty outspokenness, unabashed sexuality, defiant composure, and commanding voice have made her a compelling signifier, moving across time and space, and assuming many identities and turns. Her re-inventors, from Shakespeare to the present, have re-created her for their respective historical contexts, producing a plethora of diverse adaptations and appropriations.

The Wife of Bath is also particularly interesting in teaching and learning contexts in which modern adaptations can provide an excellent entryway into engaging with Chaucer's texts. Reading Chaucer through the lens of re-tellings allows students to come to a better understanding of Chaucer than would be otherwise possible from reading the original text in isolation and prompts them to re-consider aspects of Chaucer's original. Re-tellings are pedagogically useful tools which not only re-familiarize students with Chaucer's texts but also challenge their prior ideas of those very texts.

This paper sets out to study Zadie Smith's *Wife of Willesden* (2021), a versified theatrical adaptation of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* (c. 1387). It investigates Smith's interventions to export Chaucer from the Middle Ages to current realities. The paper comprises four sections: (1) a 'Theoretical Framework' briefly defines the key critical concepts used throughout the article: adaptation, post/colonialism, race, and gender; (2) 'Melting Pub' discusses Smith's revision of Chaucer's *General Prologue*; (3) '#Sexpositivity' looks into Alisoun's and Alvita's anti-sexist prologues and their criticism of phallocentric discourse, and (4) 'What Women Want Most' deals with the two wives' tales about rape and retributive justice. Smith's main intervention, it will be argued, comes in the remixing of the source text in terms of race and identity politics and in transposing the tale from Arthurian Camelot to Queen Nanny's Windward court in eighteenth-century colonial Jamaica. Smith disrupts the illusion of a monolithic national English history and mythology and suggests that England is not a white man's land but rather a hybrid multicultural nation.

## Theoretical Framework

Linda Hutcheon cogently defines adaptation as a "deliberate, announced and extended" revision of a prior work (2006, xiv). It is an interpretive and creative act which doubly retains and modifies the source text. It is a comprehensive engagement with the source text that shifts it to different

environments with verbal, structural, and narrative echoes. Adaptation is not replication or reproduction, but rather repetition with variation. In Kathleen Forni's words, adaptation "is never simply an imitation but necessarily requires the interpretation of the prior work in order to make the text relevant, comprehensible and appealing to new audiences" (2013, 32). The original text is adapted not only to new generic modes but also to new historical and cultural contexts: "[i]n the act of adapting, choices are made based on so many factors … including genre or medium conventions, political engagement, and personal as well as public history" (Hutcheon 2006, 108). Smith's *Wife of Willesden* is very much a deliberate and sustained engagement with Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* as it goes across the full length of the source text, retaining the central narrative and core themes (patriarchal bias, phallocentric prioritizing, female stereotyping, among others). Smith's dramaturgical uptake of the source text, however, places Chaucer in a contemporary multiethnic and multiracial London, reworking the all-white cast and disrupting the official national definitions in postcolonial England.

The second concept is post/colonialism. At its core, colonialism is "the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, often by force" (Boehmer 1995, 2). It is a commercial enterprise that seeks a sustained appropriation of other countries' resources for the benefit of the colonizing countries, backed up by a legitimizing anthropological discourse that posits the colonized people as backward, inferior, uncivilized, and therefore in need for protection from the enlightened cultured West. The phrase "attempt to govern" in the previous quote evokes acts of resistance on the part of the colonized which challenge the colonizer's cultural hegemony and undermine the operations of Manichean binarism and the various forms of stereotyping.

Postcolonialism is a continuation of the anti-colonial struggles of the past. More specifically, it refers to "the preoccupations arising from the process of decolonization and the search for alternative national and cultural identities" (Ponzanesi 2004, 3). Postcolonial writers such as Smith address colonialism's "racist and ethnocentric legacies," a colonialism that is not yet over in the twenty-first century (D'Arcens 2021, ix). Smith contests the contours of contemporary England's racial politics by revising nationalist, colonialist, and white supremacist ideologies and empowering subaltern immigrants and diaspora subjects. Alvita is not a represented object, but a representing subject who speaks back to colonialism's enduring legacies.

One of colonialism's indelible legacies is race and racial thinking. In this paper, race is construed as a false construct with actual consequences. It is "an ideological or social construct rather than a biological fact" (Kolchin 2002, 155). The idea of presumed biological differences between humans is a tool to rationalize and normalize the hierarchical categorization of humans into dominant (white) and subjected (non-white) racial groupings. With these categorizations has come a whole discourse of othering and racism. Scholarship on Western medieval race-making posits that 'black' is defined as essentially other and different and that blackness in the Middle Ages was a metaphor for deformity and evil. In *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking*, Cord Whitaker questions the theory that there "was no such thing as race in the Middle Ages, and that race is a hallmark of modernity only" (2019, 61). The Middle Ages was not a pre-racial time and medieval Europe was not an epoch peopled only by whites.

Race is also studied within the context of a contemporary globalized and hybridized Britain. Relevant to this paper are some of the insights offered by transnational studies which focus, among

other things, on "transnational spaces, hybrid identities, and subjectivities grounded in differences, and on how culture and its practices are shaped and reshaped in border zones and liminal spaces that transgress the clear lines between states and the more fuzzy ones between nations" (Jay 2010, 16). Nation here, besides being a geo-political entity, means a symbolic community, a utopian narrative that builds on the notion of "a pure, original people or folk" (Hall 1992, 295). National narratives serve to set up a sense of uniformity and ward off the "strange *coloured* trickle of immigration that became a Black flood of undesirability into British cities" (Hesse 2000, 98, italics mine). Marginal non-white subjects, such as Alvita, could nonetheless enter the nationalist signifying process to disrupt the significations of Englishness which the hegemonic discourses want to regiment and circulate. The peripheral could "intervene in the signifying process and challenge the dominant representations with narratives of their own" (McLeod 2000, 119). In an increasingly globalized and cross-cultural England, there has arisen "a need to revise the once exclusive notion of Englishness into a more inclusive direction" (Nyman 2005, 47). One single definition of Englishness simply does not exist. As will be explained in forthcoming sections, Smith's adaptation of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* unsettles the very meaning of Englishness and corroborates a multi-racial pluralism that is hospitable to ethnically and racially different people in the multicultural metropolis of London.

As with race, gender is a socially and culturally produced construct. It is often used to maintain and perpetuate patriarchal power structures and create a realization among women that they are an inferior and frail second sex. Gender differences are set in hierarchical opposition, where the masculine is always the norm and the feminine is the Other. Gender criticism focuses on such ideas as the reification and management of women's bodies; the casting of women as subordinate and accommodating creatures; the representation of women in male-authored texts as minor figures and epitomes of seduction, mania, feebleness, immorality, and obscurity; and patriarchal exclusion and prejudiced belief or misconception in relation to female status. Chaucer's Alisoun and her modern counterpart Alvita unveil the history of female omission, male supremacy, gender-based violence, rape and sexual abuse, institutional misogyny, and the bias of the canon. Conscious of their gender subalternity, they subvert phallocentrism and debunk its sexist and patriarchal ethos.

## Melting Pub

The *General Prologue* in *The Canterbury Tales* is a character sketch of the pilgrim cast meeting at the Tabard Inn in London in preparation for the trip to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket in Canterbury. The socially mixed body of narrators permits a compilation of tales of significant social diversity and generic variety. Had Chaucer written a monologic single-genre collection, he would have ended up with a set of tales that could hardly account for the multiformity of late medieval English society.[1] One typical feature of *The Canterbury Tales* is, in Paul Strohm's words, "the extent to which its generic variety is couched in polyvocality, in its embrace of separate and distinctive voices as a means of asserting social difference" (1989, 168).

[1] Giovanni Boccaccio's storytellers in the *Decameron* are "uniformly gentle and differ only in modest respects" (Strohm 1989, 68). A group of ten people leaves the plague-devastated city of Florence and whiles their time away telling each other stories. On each of ten days, one member of the party tells a story, whereby "not only the narrators but also the stories are fairly similar to each other" (Mehl 1986, 122). John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, a contemporary collection of tales, assigns all its narratives to Genius, a single-voiced authoritative teller.

Similarly, Peggy Knapp talks about *The Canterbury Tales* as "a boundary text" with many voices and genres vying for visibility and representation (1990, 8). It is "a melting pot of themes and ideas expressed in a rich mix of styles and techniques, mingling the comic and the serious, entertainment and instruction" (Asthon 1998, 7). In the *General Prologue*, Chaucer prepares the listener/reader not to expect a group of people brought together by blind chance, but "a kind of paradigmatic abstract of human society" (Mehl 1986, 133). The *Prologue* presents "a compaignye / Of sondry folk" from different social strands (*GP* 24–25), a kaleidoscopic image of late medieval England.[2]

In her introductory notes to *The Wife of Willesden*, Smith hails Chaucer's orchestration of difference and democratic inclusiveness. She particularly eulogizes his creation of a richly mixed and down-to-earth discourse in *The Canterbury Tales*:[3]

> Chaucer wrote of the people and for them, never doubting that even the most rarefied religious, political and philosophical ideas could be conveyed in the language the people themselves speak. I have tried to maintain that democratic principle. (*WW* xv)

Though none of Chaucer's pilgrims is depicted as having a specific racial or ethnic background, his spirit is one of diversity and multiplicity. The *Tales* is an anthology of different outlooks, with each pilgrim presenting a provisional perception of reality. By subjecting incongruent discourses to one another, Chaucer seems to suggest that no single framework, except a dialogic or heteroglossic one, can hope to be inclusive of and receptive to the rival discourses of his time.

The Colin Campbell Pub on the Kilburn High Road in the contemporary globalized metropolis of London is an equally dialogic and mixed territory. It posits a timely setting for the racially and socially diverse community of people celebrating the proclamation of Brent as the Borough of Culture for 2020 in Smith's play.[4] The London pub and the cultural event make possible the bringing together of socially and ethnically different subjects from sundry walks of life. As a bicultural English-Jamaican writer, Smith engages with "multiculturalism as a strategy for dealing with difference in a contemporary and increasingly hybridized city like London" (Jay 2010, 11). She knows that no one

[2] All Chaucer quotes are from F. N. Robinson's *The Riverside Chaucer*. For notational purposes, the *General Prologue*, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, the *Wife Bath's Tale* and Smith's *The Wife of Willesden* are abbreviated as *GP*, *WBP*, *WBT* and *WW*, respectively.

[3] In an interview at the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Smith talked about Chaucer, along with Shakespeare and Keats, as "working class writers. They are brothers because they speak about the people and come from the people" (2021). They are middle-class people (not aristocrats), and this gives their works a certain power of multiplicity and an openness to many different influences. Worth noting in this connection is that Smith's opinion is not in line with current Chaucer scholarship. Marion Turner, for instance, argues that Chaucer was not of the working class and that he straddled different social worlds: he was the son of a wine merchant, a London customs officer, a Member of Parliament, a soldier, and a diplomat (2019, 33–50). Chaucer's "social fluidity" makes it difficult to place him in a single social class (Swanson 2000, 403).

[4] Smith explains that what pulled her to Chaucer was Twitter. She "spotted a copy of the *Canterbury Tales* on a shelf" in her New York office (*WW* xii) and thought about turning the *Wife of Bath* into a "short monologue" to be performed by "a local actress at the Kilburn Theatre" as part of the 2020 Borough of Culture festivities in Brent (*WW* xiii). Smith's agent confused "monologue" for "play" in a press release and Smith got hundreds of emails and Twitter posts by people congratulating her for the upcoming play. Smith says she had no other alternative but to write the play. What was "literally forced by Twitter" (Smith 2021) ended up being one of the most "delightful writing experiences of [her] life (*WW* xiv).

blueprint, except a hybrid one, can dislocate the borders of ethnicity, race, and nation and can possibly (re)define and *reinvent* Englishness.[5]

Besides holding important British government institutions and agencies, London is "a synecdoche for the nation" (McLeod 2004, 18). It is an emblem of English national identity. However, London, as "a profoundly polycultural" city (McLeod 2004, 2), is also home to thousands of immigrants, and it is the heart of the multicultural nation "incubat[ing] new social relations and cultural forms which conflict with the advocacy of a national culture or the pursuit of cultural nationalism" (McLeod 2004, 18). Following waves of mass migration from former British colonies, London has demographically evolved into a multicultural city with "new mixtures and new identities" (Guignery 2014, 243). While the nation is defined by "stability and continuity, the city offers important possibilities for cultural unsettling and transformation" (Robins 2001, 491). The xenophobic construction of Englishness is unsettled in the vibrant multiethnic city of modern-day London, where migrant and diaspora subjects can nurture their differences and challenge prevailing national definitions.

Chaucer's *General Prologue* is racially and ethnically remapped by Smith. The Campbell Pub is "inundated by a *colourful crowd*. There's been dancing; some people are in carnival-like costume; there are people in their national dress, families, teenagers, lovers. Every possible kind of person" (*WW* 5, italics mine).[6] This note in the stage directions recalls the polyvocal aspect of Chaucer's *Tales*. It also announces one important ontological deviation from the source text: the predominantly white Anglophone Tabard Inn becomes a multi-cultural contact-zone hosting a multitude of different ethnicities and subjectivities, a hybrid space of border-crossings which make possible cultural exchanges between the different groups of the postcolonial British society. Chaucer's Inn is hybridized and is made to accommodate diversity mostly in terms of race. This cross-cultural and cross-racial heterogeneity of Smith's Inn reenters the all-white medieval canon and raises questions about racism and its lingering power in modern-day politics and culture.[7]

The Author-narrator (a black woman in a head-wrap, a self-recasting of Zadie Smith) and Publican Polly (the English woman who runs the Colin Campbell Pub and a counterpart to Harry Bailey, the moderator of Chaucer's *Tales*) both set the festive mood of the "pilgrimage" and the terms of the storytelling contest. The winner "will receive a full English breakfast" (*WW* 7). The Author restates the peaceful togetherness of the pilgrims in the pub:

[5] Smith, a British-born Londoner with one Jamaican parent, may be located within a literary generation of British authors such as Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali (among others) who spotlight topics such as cultural diversity, identity politics, and race, and who wish to expand perceptions of Englishness.

[6] Turner points out that "the Colin Campbell is a real pub, founded in 1898 and named after a British army officer who had a long career, fighting in many campaigns and rising to become Commander-in-Chief of British forces in India" (2023, 238). The Pub's name evokes Britain's disreputable history of colonial exploitation and dispossession and perhaps suggests that colonial ideology is never dead. The machinery of colonialism did not magically unravel with the fall of the Empire.

[7] It is worth pointing out that Smith dedicates her play to the "*Windrush* generation, with much love and respect" (*WW* vii). The Windrush generation is so called after the Empire Windrush ship, which brought hundreds of Jamaicans to settle in Britain in the summer of 1948. The 1948 British Nationality Act gave Caribbean and other Commonwealth people British citizenship and the right for settlement. The images of the ship's arrival have come to signify the dawn of British multiculturalism (Gentleman 2019, 13). Upon arrival, however, these Jamaican settlers and their descendants faced poverty, anti-immigrant violence, and institutional racism. Some of them were classified by the Home Office as illegal immigrants because they did not have immigration documents. They were arrested and threatened with deportation from a country they had called home for many decades.

> We had all types of people in that night,
> Young and old, rich and poor, black, brown and white-
> But local: students, merchants, a bailiff,
> People from church, temple, mosque, shul. (*WW* 7)

The plural pronominal shifter *we* intimates the cancellation of social formalities and protocols and reiterates the multiplicity and diversity of such a congregation of people drawn from different stations of life. Smith synchronously revises the otherwise white crowd in Chaucer's Inn and perhaps points to the elision of chromatic diversity by white social and cultural hegemonies. The inclusivity of the shifter and the race-conscious cast call to mind the black nonexistence in premodern literature and culture.

In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, Paul Gilroy studies the ways in which blackness is construed as incompatible with Englishness. Gilroy says that black people have been vilified and grotesqued in English history (1987, 46). They were seen as outsiders menacing the English way of life, and the "process of national decline [was] presented as coinciding with the dilution of once homogeneous and continuous national stock by alien strains" (1987, 46). There was a fear that difference would dislocate the dominant white culture and threaten the nation. Blacks were perceived as a source of ontological anxiety, so to speak. Gilroy says that "Blackness and Englishness are constructed as incompatible, mutually exclusive identities. To speak of the British or English people is to speak of the white people" (1996, 357). Englishness, in other words, is monocultural and cannot admit difference. To be English is to be white.

In a similar vein, Whitaker suggests that Englishness meant whiteness. In "Race-ing the Dragon: The Middle Ages, Race, and Trippin' into the Future," he states that black people have no history in white medieval records and if they happen to have one, they are mostly re-presented as threatening others (2015, 4). Whitaker argues that the image of blackness in medieval literature "usually resists positive connotations" and that "in all cases … blackness denotes abnormality" because "to be black is, in the European Middle Ages, to be other" (2015, 4). The Middle Ages "denied blacks the right to a shared medieval past that would, in turn, authorize them to share the present that emerges from it" (2015, 6). "Where were the black people in the Middle Ages?" one could ask (2015, 6). Where were the black people in Chaucer's Tabard Inn and his pilgrimage?

In using a black woman as the protagonist for her play, Smith contests the notion of Englishness and brings the margin to the center, envisioning a contemporary multiracial England. She revisits the *white* Middle Ages and places in the center what was previously (de)centered by white hegemonic discourse. She infuses or injects blackness into a narrative in which it had not often been accepted before and ascribes racial content to a classical text by a white male author. A black woman's inscription in *writing* is perhaps a first recognition that those *outside* authorized culture may indeed have a place and something to say. Smith re-reads or resignifies the all-white Chaucerian text and transforms it to a racialized script with a colored protagonist and racial nuances. She sets the stage for an adaptation that expands upon the original text and engages Chaucer in a *tête-à-tête* with a different period in British history.

In the dramatis personae, Alvita is introduced as "a Jamaican British woman in her mid-fifties" (*WW* xix). Further details are given piecemeal in the *General Lock-In* by other characters, mostly her

husbands and her two female friends Asma (a local rebel Pakistani wife) and Zaire (her African best friend). Instead of being introduced in a single section as per Alisoun in the *General Prologue* (445–76), Alvita's portrait is parceled out to different characters. Most of her dispositional attributes and physical traits are more or less the same as Alisoun's, but the method of characterization shifts from telling (narration) to showing (conversation). Ryan, Winston, and Darren talk about Alvita in largely inimical and derisive terms: she is deaf in one ear (*WW* 9), which alludes to her obstinacy and obduracy; she is an unduly over-married woman, "hitched five times to five men" (*WW* 10); her "red underwear," the "skirt that shows her shape," and "gap-toothed smile" evoke her boldness, libertinism, and lust. Set against this is a positive image and friendly appraisal of Alvita by Asma and Zaire: she is "a well-travelled woman" (*WW* 10), "sweet and wise and an expert on love" (*WW* 11); her Zulu hat (*WW* 11) is a visual indexical sign which calls attention to her racially mixed identity and her distinctiveness; the reference to her "fake gold chains" possibly suggests her middle-class background (*WW* 10). Alvita is perhaps less business-minded and mercantile than Alisoun, whose great skill in *weaving* and *wiving* made her a bounteous fortune. "Rich / She is not," says Asma emphatically (*WW* 9), but she is trendy and mindful in her own way. She carries a singular aura, and it is difficult to trick her or assimilate her to a dominant majority identity.

Like Alisoun, Alvita is hard-nosed and unbending. She refuses to be "ushered towards the little stage" (*WW* 12) on the grounds of her race. The use of the passive voice masks what seems to be an act of discrimination and structural exclusion of the black body. Alvita takes "her rightful place, centre stage in the Colin Campbell" (*WW* 12). She unsettles the colonial hierarchies of center and periphery and replaces whiteness as the presumed locus of power and status. Non-whites have witnessed centuries of racial invisibility, sidelining, and misrecognition. Alvita challenges the colonial value-system and refuses to be a peripheral or tangential black subject demoted to cameo roles and ancillary stations. In "The Politics of Recognition," Charles Taylor states that being recognized or being otherwise ignored greatly affects identity and explains that recognition gives dignity whereas nonrecognition leads to abasement:

> identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. (1994, 25)

Alvita rejects this reduced mode of being and refuses to be othered, obscured, and stigmatized by racist politics. Rather than accept an allotted spot to tell her tale and occupy a subservient or overshadowed position, she moves to the center and disrupts whiteness's claim to supremacy. The pub "turns black" (*WW* 12) literally and figuratively as Alvita is placed under a theatrical spotlight in preparation for her performance, one that should recover her presence in a white Euro-centric culture predicated on the absence and erasure of blackness. The re-telling and re-centering of her experience as a black peripheral subject is an act of decolonization, reinscribing black presence in a hegemonic white-centered culture and history. Smith writes back to and reframes the white canon by critically appropriating and reconfiguring Chaucer's white text. The incorporation of a black woman into the

white Middle Ages is a cultural signifier in its own right, a sort of icon indicating cultural and counter-canonical resistance.

Before Alvita speaks, the scene freezes in silence, and the Author gives what she calls "a Chaucerian apologia" (*WW* 12) which matches Chaucer's apology at the close of his *General Prologue*. Chaucer pleads with the audience to pardon any immodesty or offensive content and restates his role as a modest hearer-recorder faithfully reproducing "olde stories":

> But first I pray yow, of youre courteisye,
> That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye,
> Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,
> To telle yow hir wordes properly.
> For this ye knowen al so wel as I,
> *Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,*
> *He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan*
> Everich a word, if it be in his charge. (*GP* 725–32, italics mine)

This metanarrative digression posits an unassuming author behind the scenes. Smith reproduces a similar (though substantially reduced) disclaimer. The Author states:

> But before she starts, a word to the wise:
> Not a trigger warning, exactly, but
> A proviso: it's not my tale. I just
> Copied it down from the original.
> I could make stuff up and rewrite it all
> But that would surely defeat the purpose,
> And if Alvita does make you nervous
> It's worth remembering—though I'm sure you know—
> When wives spoke thus four hundred years ago
> You were all shocked then. The shock never ends
> When women say things usually said by men. (*WW* 12)

Like Smith, Chaucer is an adapter and an intertextual writer. A substantial part of his pre-*Canterbury Tales* writing and the *Tales* derives from classical Roman authors (such as Boethius and Ovid) and contemporary French and Italian poets (such as Eustache Deschamps, Guillaume de Machaut, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Francesco Petrarch). Chaucer translates and *nativizes* the continental literary legacy, tailoring his sources in response to the frame of mind of his age. He boils a story down to its core tenets, and then builds it over again, adding new material and new ideas into the source text. A "chemical reaction" takes place between the literary heritage and the artist, creating a new "compound" (Sanders 2006, 18). "Chaucer," Manuella Coppola writes, "deploys a variety of tones, styles and genres ranging from the exemplum to the fable, from tragedy to farce, from the philosophical dialogue to the romance, drawing on existing texts from different traditions and reworking them in a web of intertextual references" (2015, 308). In the same vein, Gillian Rudd states:

> Chaucer is essentially an intertextual writer. [I]t is only fitting that his own works have become integral to latter day intertextuality. Certainly, the persistence of Chaucerian

> allusion is a testament to his standing in our view of English literary heritage. From a critical point of view, research in this area marks a continued interest in the reception of Chaucer across time, rather than an insistence on asserting a single, unchanging, correct interpretation of his works. (2001, 116)

The process of re-reading and remodeling is a never-ending one. Texts are never closed to other transpositions and re-tellings. "All texts invoke and rework other texts in a rich and ever-evolving cultural mosaic" (Sanders 2006, 17). Robert Stam similarly points out that "the literary text is not a closed, but an open structure to be reworked by a boundless context. The text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating intertext, which is seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation" (2000, 57). Like Chaucer, Smith morphs the source text to address relevant contemporary matters. She knows that adaptation is not simple duplication but imitation with variation. She particularly targets transhistorical issues like male control of women's bodies and sexuality, the stereotyped representation of the female subject, the tireless belief in male superiority, institutional misogyny, the bias of the canon, and how these issues intersect with questions of de/colonization, race, and ethnicity in present-day cosmopolitan London.

## #Sexpositivity

The *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (the longest in *The Canterbury Tales*) is a site of anti-patriarchal resistance. It has the form of a dramatic monologue based on the rich tradition of anti-feminine literature of the sort collected in the Wife of Bath's fifth husband Jankyn's fictitious "Book of Wicked Wives." Like a present-day standup comedian, Alisoun wittily rails against masculine clerical authority, deep-rooted misogynist clichés, and puritanical views of sexuality.[8] The *Wife of Willesden's Prologue* (almost twice as long as her tale) also takes the form of an audience-directed dramatic monologue that is nonetheless embedded with numerous responses and comments by other characters. It is Alvita who commands the dialogue and dominates the show. A natural talker who is well-informed about real-life experience and biblical authority, she mocks contemporary forms of male bigotry, the stereotyped representation of the female subject, and the persistent devaluation of women.

Both women take the body to be a potent subversive signifier. Alisoun makes her body the center of attention. Her *Prologue* amounts to an unapologetic story about her genital parts. She refers to them as the "flour of al myn age" (*WBP* 113), "membres … of generacion" (*WBP* 116) and "thynges smale" (*WBP* 121), an "instrument" (*WBP* 149), "queynte" (*WBP* 332, 444, 516), "bele chose" (*WBP* 447, 510), and "chambre of Venus" (*WBP* 618). Alvita likewise unashamedly talks about her sexual parts as "equipment between the legs" (*WW* 26), "genitals" (*WW* 27), "God's gift" (*WW* 28), "pum" (*WW* 47), and "private place" (*WW* 56). Far from being an epistemological confounder, a prison of the soul or a source of evil, the body in its entirety is hailed as the very essence of life. The two women stress the corporeality of the human being and celebrate sex in a culture that sees it as sinful and aberrant and that takes female bodies as cradles of evil.

[8] Although Alisoun is a male-authored character/narrator, she exhibits strong female subjectivity and agency. In Marshall Leicester's words, Alisoun "is a male poet's impersonation of a female speaker" (1984, 157). In her female-empowered prologue and tale, she rebels against the ingrained structures of male domination and misogynist discourse.

In both prologues, clerical sermons and theological authorities are cited only to be ridiculed. Alisoun starts her *Prologue* by postulating that her authority to speak on marriage is justified by her experience rather than her biblical knowledge (*WBP* 26). As B. R. Straus puts it, "the Wife is a woman of the world who supports her authority of experience with her empirical sample of five different husbands" (1997, 531). Alvita articulates a similar experiential *savoir-vivre*:

> Let me tell you something: I do not need
> Any permission or college degrees
> To speak on how marriage is stress. I been
> Married five damn times since I was nineteen! (*WW* 15)

For Alisoun, virginity, which the Church venerates, is not necessary; bodies are given by God to be used; she has no wish to be a saint or a nun, nor does she admit the rule that a widow or a widower must not remarry; the Bible does not forbid remarriage—several saints had many brides. "Alison's insistence on physical pleasure is not unlike the sex-positivity movement," says Smith (*WW* xvi).[9] She unapologetically rejoices in recalling her bodily delights and sexual conquests:

> But lord Crist! whan that it remembreth me
> Upon my youthe and on my jolitee,
> It tikleth me aboute myn herte rote;
> Unto this day it doth myn herte bote
> That I have had my world as in my time! (*WBP* 469–73)

In the same way, Alvita defends female sexuality and remarriage. She states that chastity is an ideal, but not her ideal. She married five times, and she is ready for the sixth. She jokingly promises to post a picture of herself on Instagram "chucking the bouquet to the next sista" (*WW* 19). She interrogates the allowable quota for remarriages and dismisses the disgracing of women who have been married more than once. She explains that women are like men who have had several wives, such as Abraham and Jacob (*WW* 20). She comically proclaims that she does not want her "hymen to grow back" (*WW* 19). Her outlook is that of derisive, though jovial, dismissal of all the Church teachings about virginity. Alvita refuses the moralization of sexuality and relativizes exegetical glossing of the Bible:

> Now hol' up, hol' up, my dear Auntie P:
> Thing is: I can read just like you can read,
> And I'm telling you no. It's true Paul said
> He didn't want us having sex for fun—
> But it weren't like: COMMANDMENT NUMBER ONE.
> Auntie, what you call laws I call advice!
> A guideline. And they all sound very nice,
> But everyone got to make their own choice. (*WW* 21)

[9] Sex positivity is about "a perspective and a lifestyle of not perpetuating or creating 'norms' or policing the borders of what is 'acceptable' when sex is consensual, non-damaging, and pleasurable" (Donaghue 2015, 5). It refers to harmless, non-toxic, non-coercive, gratifying sexual experiences and relationships.

Alvita adheres to a both/and rather than an either/or logic. She is not against purity, but she repudiates virginal purity as a standard of female value. She particularly rejects virginity and widowhood as the only proper roles for women. Alvita refuses the sexless perfection advocated by Church and monastic writings and celebrates marital sexuality and consensual sex:

> My thing is, to be honest, I'm just real.
> I do and say exactly what I feel.
> I'm not fussy, but I stick to my guns
> And in marriage I'll use this [instrument] for fun …
> Exactly, it's about consent. You'll agree
> To owe me love, good sex, and that when we
> Marry, your body and soul will be mine. (*WW* 28)

St. Paul and Black Jesus—who feature as comic choral characters commenting on the action—validate in a drolly feminist way Alvita's ideas on marriage as blissful reciprocity and on sex positivity, which considers all consensual sexual activities to be fundamentally healthy and pleasurable. "You husbands! Love your women well, day in / Day out!" exclaims St. Paul (*WW* 28). "Alvita is grateful for BLACK JESUS's intervention on her behalf," the narrator tells us (*WW* 43).

As noted earlier, Alvita's performance is played out within a chorus of male and female voices. Her five husbands (both dead and alive) are present throughout the show. They first appear in nonspeaking roles as figurants, looking curiously at each other:

> *As this is said we see Alvita's husbands,* IAN, DARREN, WINSTON, ELDRIDGE and RYAN—*who are dotted around the pub—standing up and start looking at each other curiously. We may not notice that the fifth husband,* RYAN*, is the red-head with the video camera, who we can't really see: the video equipment obscures his face. When he stands it must look as if he is just doing something to his camera. After a moment they sit back down again.* (*WW* 18)

The five masculine figures are rendered inaudible for a substantial stage time. They are collectively signified through the depersonalized object pronoun them: "You think five's a lot? I could've had ten! / But I'm well choosy. I actually picked them / For their *ass*-ets" (*WW* 9). Ryan, the husband who most exemplifies virulent and aggressive misogyny, is not only silenced but also eclipsed and obscured. A little later, the same static picture of the husbands is restated: "*We see the* FIVE MEN *identified as she mentions them, but again, that* RYAN *is one of them remains unclear*" (*WW* 31).

The blurriness that surrounds Ryan serves as a statement against the misogynist ethos he represents. Ryan, an "Oxford student" (*WW* 51), is a contemporary double of Jankyn, Alisoun's fifth husband. "Bounden in a volume" (*WBP* 681), Jankyn's book is a detrimental weapon in the sex war he launches against his wife:

> He hadde a book that gladly, nyght and day,
> For his desport he wolde rede always;
> He cleped it Valerie and Theofraste,
> At which book he lough alwey ful faste. (*WBP* 669–72)

Likewise, Ryan's book is a massive collection of antifeminist "pronouncements" vilifying and reifying women (*WW* 59), except that this time it is "mental crap he got off the Internet" (*WW* 60), mostly about "evil women's lives" (*WW* 60). For Ryan, the only true good woman is "his mum" (*WW* 61). "The rest of us? Witches," Alvita exclaims (*WW* 61). He reads to her a version of femininity generated by a masculine rhetoric that pictures women as grotesquely acquisitive, oversexed, and devious. He refers to specific examples from ancient misogynist lore starting with Eve who is to blame for the "original sin" (*WW* 62). Christ "had to be brought and killed" because of her avid greed (*WW* 62). As malicious daughters of Eve, all women have ever since kept up her spiteful work. Like Jankyn, Ryan refers to age-old stories of wicked wives: Delilah who betrayed Samson by cutting his hair; Deianira who set Hercules on fire; Xantippe who poured a chamber pot on the head of Socrates; Clytemnestra who killed her husband for lust; and Livia and Lucia, "the stone-cold husband killers" (*WW* 64). Ryan also enjoys reading from books such as Warren Farrell's *The Myth of Male Power* (1993) and Jordan Peterson's *Twelve Rules for Life* (2018) which posit that feminism has gone too far (*WW* 60). He also reads from "tabloid nightmares about husband murderers" (*WW* 65) and is intensely absorbed by "anti-wife online memes" (*WW* 66).

Misogyny, be it medieval or modern, is a deep-seated cultural metanarrative passed from one generation to another. Alisoun raises the question of authorial gender bias, arguing that "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" (*WBP* 693–6). Zaire, Alvita's doppelganger in the play, points to the *mis*representation of women in male-authored texts and the imperative to write or be written:

> But who wrote all these books about women?
> Mate, if women wrote the books he studied
> The list of wives abused, misused, bloodied
> Would be longer than the Good Book itself!
> It'd be too bloody big to fit on the shelf! (*WW* 61)

Anti-feminist literature (for both Alisoun and Alvita) is the by-product of male sexual anxieties and disorders. "When they're old, and their hard-ons are gone, / These same professors go and write their tomes," says Alvita (*WW* 61). In a dramatic moment of poetic justice, Alvita, much like Alisoun, exacts revenge on (1) husbands, (2) clerks and (3) texts. She "tore that page out his book" (*WW* 59), "pulled back her fist and clocked him proper / Hard on his cheek (*WW* 68). The ripping of the "Book of Wicked Wives" is a reaction to the physical and epistemic violence she has suffered.

Both prologues end with a domestic peace that brings the couples together. Jankyn and Ryan kneel like two Romeos, asking for a kiss and promising total surrender to their wives. Alisoun admits: "God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde, / As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde, / And also trewe, and so was he to me" (*WBP* 823–5). The last phrase, "so was he to me" signifies marriage as a union of shared roles and mutual love. Alvita also reports Ryan's kindness to her:

> And after that day, we had no more beef.
> Lawd, for a kinder wife you couldn't arks
> If you searched from India to Denmark.
> And to be fair, he's also kind to me.

> I pray to God—well, through my Auntie P—
> To bless him, seeing as now he submits
> To me. Right: my tale. You still up for it? (*WW* 70)

Both women are against rigid Church doctrines, and both value the idea that people should follow their desires without culpability or regret.

Smith says that even though Chaucer's text is "as distant as the moon" (*WW* xiv), she can still hear Alisoun's voice all around Kilburn:

> I knew that she was speaking to me, and that she was a Kilburn girl at heart. What started out as homework soon came to feel like a wonderful case of serendipity. For Alisoun's voice—brash, honest, cheeky, salacious, outrageous, unapologetic—is one I've heard and loved all my life: in the flats, at school, in the playgrounds of my childhood and then the pub of my maturity, at bus stops, in shops, and of course up and down the Kilburn High Road, any day of the week. The words may be different but the spirit is the same. (*WW* xiv)

There is a strong conceptual kinship and ontological affinity between the two women in spite of the 600-year gap between them:

> The distance between Canterbury and Kilburn and between the fourteenth century and the twenty-first, looked epic. But I wasn't very long on the road before the sympathetic rhymes between the two became audible and then deafening. 'Soverigntee' began to sound a lot like 'consent,' for example, and Alisoun'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. Even the act of sexual violence that sits shockingly at the centre of her tale—and the restorative justice Alisoun offers as a possible example of progressive punishment—read, to me, as absolutely contemporary. (*WW* xvi)

While Alisoun and Alvita are women living in different eras, with different racial backgrounds and different socio-cultural contexts, they both display an equally strong female subjectivity and share common ideas about the structural silencing and maligning of women in patriarchal discourse. They raise similar transhistorical questions about patriarchal bias, the exclusion of women from the canon, man's control of female sexuality, sexual violence, phallocentric prioritizing, female stereotyping, and the discursive representation of women as sex objects and submissive others. White or black, medieval or contemporary, women are devalued in a patriarchal culture that condemns them to be a subaltern second sex.

## What Women Want Most

As noted earlier, adaptation can be used for subversive ends. The adaptation of a classical text, story, or myth is one way of redefining identity or responding to the source text and the context from which it originates. The peripheral seeks to relocate itself in a space that has historically excluded it. However, mere relocation in a classical text is not enough. Adaptation allows marginalized subjects to morph their own experiences onto canonical stories and creates a potential space within which artists work

with or against the source text, cross-examining and reshaping the story, drawing lines of connection between histories and cultures, and adding new voices into the mix.

Smith revisits blackness in medieval white bookshelves, history, and mythology and problematizes unitary national narratives and narrow myths about purity and belonging. She reviews the equation of Englishness with whiteness. She deterritorializes Chaucer's tale by deploying a geocultural location outside the boundaries of white Anglophone hegemony and outside the imagined unity of Englishness. She moves the tale from the fabulous court in medieval England to eighteenth-century Jamaica. "I couldn't imagine Alvita using King Arthur as a point of reference," says Smith (*WW* xviii). The tale cannot be anchored in the semiotics of the Arthurian tradition and is therefore "transferred from Arthurian Camelot / to Maroon Town, Jamaica / Featuring Queen Nanny! / Famed rebel slave and leader of peoples!" (*WW* 75).[10] This contextual reframing of the tale takes a racial dimension. The chronotopic transposition from England to a former colony evokes the historical conflicts, ethnic tensions, and wounds of slavery during the colonial era. It calls to mind British colonial rule in Jamaica, which lasted more than three centuries (1655–1962), the hard labor of the enslaved people on the sugar plantations owned by the avid "clans from H'england" (*WW* 96), and the more recent racial tensions and deportation threats of the 2018 Windrush Scandal. In setting Alvita's tale in colonial Jamaica, Smith refracts the idea that England is a monoculture. Contemporary England is a multicultural *transnation*, and the role of the former colonies in this diversity cannot be underrated or go unrecognized. "All modern Britons, regardless of their own ethnic background, should think about the fact that Jamaican history and Ghanian history, for instance, are part of British history too," says Turner (2023, 244). Ex-colonies are now part of British history, identity, and culture.

The discursive interface that Smith sets up between Jamaican and British cultures might evoke lines of fracture and/or continuity between the two geocultural entities in a globalized and postcolonial world. The interchange contests the illusion of a uniform national English myth drenched in cultural and literary whiteness by opening up the English canon into a transnational hybridized literary space. The border crossing and the shift between different locations and temporal frameworks in the *Tale* captures the transnationalism of contemporary England. In Paul Jay's words, this movement is "about the production of subjectivity in a world in which, increasingly, the borders and the histories of discrete nation-states cannot contain and do not determine experience" (2010, 177). Englishness is not just one thing or one location. It is a *mélange* of distinct things from different territories. Smith imaginatively reconfigures the relation between the metropolis and the periphery by hybridizing the two disparate worlds within the same verbal space of her play. Salman Rushdie says hybridity is the "intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world" (1991, 394). While hybridity cannot completely erase the legacies of English colonialism and white nationalism, it can nonetheless

[10] Queen Nanny (c. 1686–1733) led a group of formerly enslaved Africans to revolt against the British colonial forces. It is believed that the Queen had paranormal powers which she used to vanquish the British colonizers, and that she was a great military tactician and strategist. In 1975, the Jamaican government declared Nanny a national hero. Like Queen Nanny, King Arthur was a legendary ruler, a brave warrior who led British forces in battle against Saxon invaders, a protector of the realm, the poor, the weak, and women. Both are near-mythic figures who fought against invaders and aggressors (Greenwood 2021, 20).

contest the persistent agency of racist, nationalist, and colonialist discourses, and offer a positive prospect of racial and ethnic diversity and peaceful *convivencia*.

At this point in the play, the Author-narrator notes that the Campbell Pub turns into a cross-cultural hybrid stage where diverse groups of people mix and mingle despite differences of race and cultural background, a polyphonic *tour de force*:

> *We are surprised to find the women with the deepest thoughts are the people we've hardly noticed up to now:* KELLY*, Alvita's niece;* PUBLICAN POLLY*; and* ASMA*, the young rebel wife. They all now stand to speak, and with an intensity that changes the atmosphere in the pub. They speak in their natural accents—Black-British Kilburn for* KELLY*, Pakistan-inflected for* ASMA*—but the words themselves seem to come from a transnational sacred text of rights and duties. These women are bearing witness to a truth.* (*WW* 81)

The ageless question of what women want most becomes a vehicle for a heated transnational debate that loosens boundaries between people. The heterogeneous and sonically mixed pub, which hosts a congregation of South Asian, Caribbean, African, and Anglo-Londoners, becomes a trope for a (romantic but possibly attainable) globalized postcolonial Britain, a trope "which self-consciously promotes a utopian hybridity," in Dominic Head's words (2002, 187).[11] As Turner puts it, "countries such as Jamaica, Nigeria, or Bangladesh are marked as part of British identity, countries whose histories have constructed modern Britain just as much as the imagined Arthurian past of Britain itself" (2023, 138). King Arthur and Queen Nanny are equally integral parts of Englishness. The diverse voices in the Pub promote a sense of an eclectic English culture.

While the time-space chronotopes in the two tales are different, the events in both texts revolve around the same story: the correction of a rapist. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, a "lusty bachelor" (*WBT* 882) raped a nameless maiden. As a punishment, he is sent on a year-long journey to discover "what thyng is it that wommen moost desiren" (*WBT* 905). The rapist cannot understand that women, as complex human beings, want no single thing *per se*. The Young Maroon in *The Wife of Willesden* is subject to the same "restorative justice" (*WW* 78): he must correctly answer the question or lose his life, but no two women can provide him with the same answer. "Money, power, jewels, actual orgasms, multiple partners, attention, freedom, no judgement" (*WW* 80–2) are not the answer.

After losing hope of learning the answer and on his way back to Queen Nanny's court in Windward to meet his fate, the Maroon boy comes across an old ugly wife (acted out by Auntie P and by Alvita near the end of the play). She promises to give him the answer to the riddle on condition that he grant her anything she requests. The answer, already stated in the Prologue, is consent or sovereignty in Chaucer's idiom (*WW* 90). The Young Maroon says:

> Queen Nanny, who rules this place with iron fist:
> The thing women want is basically this:
> They want their husbands to consent freely;
> To submit to their wives' will—which should be

[11] Multiculturalism has its darker realities. Racial tensions and racially motivated violence can arise at any time. However, this violence could be suppressed by recognizing and accepting the multiple, intersecting cultural identities in contemporary England and reinventing national definitions.

> Natural in love; for we submit love.
> To keep power, and have no man above
> Them—all women want this. (*WW* 90)

The sly old hag claims her payment and asks the young man to marry her and submit himself to her will as a husband. In a typically Jamaican accent, the old wife asks the Queen to grant her justice:

> Wait now: I found this boy 'pon de grass.
> Lawd-a-mercy, Queen Nanny! 'Force you pass
> Out of dis place, I truly, humbly arks
> You to do right by me. That is your task.
> *I* gave this answer to the boy. And he
> Made a very solemn promise to me:
> … You swore I'd become your wife. (*WW* 91)

Ironically, the hag has had total sovereignty over the Young Maroon's life ever since he swore to do anything she would ask of him. He is trapped in a marriage against his will and desires. The old hag does not turn into a "fair and young" virgin as in Chaucer's Arthurian text (*WBT* 1251) but morphs through multi-roling into Alvita, who "reveals her fabulous, thick, middle-aged beauteousness" (*WW* 103). For Smith, beauty should neither be associated with youth nor with whiteness and the dominant Euro-centric beauty stereotypes.

The two young men in both tales are attitudinally and behaviorally transformed from impetuous rapists into selfless husbands. The repentant offenders demonstrate what Bernard Huppé calls "a deep-seated failure to understand the sovereignty of women" (1948, 380). They are both sent on a punitive/corrective quest to see if they can learn the importance of sovereignty to women. They are both trapped in marriages against their wishes and placed in the structural position of powerless raped maidens. They are figuratively raped.

In Chaucer's text, the knight's chivalric masculinity is demasculinized. The aggressively violent and traumatizing act of rape is re-enacted in the reversal of gender roles whereby the rapist-male turns into raped-fe/male. The male rape-victim bellows, "Allas and weylawey!" revoicing the desperate screams of the sexually assaulted maiden (*WBT* 1058). He pleads with the old woman to let him "for Goddes love" (*WBT* 1060). He entreats her, "Taak al my good and lat my body go" (*WBT* 1061). He is ready to give anything to save the sovereignty of his body. His supplications are "al for noght" (*WBT* 1070). He is "constreyned" to "wedde / And … gooth to bedde" with the old hag (*WBT* 1071–2). In describing the knight as a despondent maiden struggling to protect his body, Chaucer "forces him to experience his victim-survivor's fear of violation of bodily sovereignty" (Harris 2017, 5).

In Smith's adaptation, the rapist also turns into a terrorized rape-victim. "You can take all my creps, my diamond rings, / But please leave my body! *It's my body*," the Young Maroon screams (*WW* 91–2). The maiden's rape scene in Smith is delivered in a sentence that is syntactically splintered by two pauses and a long blank space. Rape is too horrific and too dreadful to be expressed in words:

> A virgin, with no interest in this guy,
> But he wouldn't stop
> *Pause.*

He thought his strength gave
Him the right.
*Longer pause.* (*WW* 77)

On his wedding day with the old hag, the Maroon boy is visualized in language that is evocative of the muted howling of the raped maiden. The heartless victimizer is now a helpless victim: he "had no defense" (*WW* 92); he was "desperate and sad at the state of his life" (*WW* 93). In bed, he is described as an abused "mole" that is "cut up" by a predator (*WW* 93). He frantically tries to bargain his way out of the forced marriage but to no avail. The cold-blooded hag ignores all his pleas. In rhetorically castrating the two rapists, Chaucer and Smith seem to say that sex without consent is rape and that rape must be severely penalized. Rape's traumatic harms cannot be "fixed up" (*WW* 94), and sexual predators should not go unpunished.

## Conclusion

The Wife of Bath and the Wife of Willesden, says Smith, are "half-sisters" (*WW* xviii). Alisoun and Alvita are frank, lively, and good-humored women. They share "a startling indifference to the opinion of others and a passionate compulsion to live their own lives as they please" (*WW* xvii). They are eager defenders of uncensored life. Although they come from two distant centuries and different racial and cultural ancestries, there is a strong ideological and epistemic affinity between them. Both women rail against similar forms of sexual violence, spousal abuse, sexist ideology and sexist prejudice, patriarchal bias, and cultural assumptions about female frailty and wickedness.

*The Wife of Willesden* is, in Smith's words, "a direct transposition of the Wife of Bath's prologue and tale" (*WW* xvii). Smith faithfully re-tells much of the Chaucerian text, but she also grounds it in the context of a multicultural, postcolonial London. Smith's main intervention comes in the remixing of the source text in terms of race and identity politics. In racializing the cast of characters and in setting the tale in eighteenth-century colonial Jamaica, she revises the notion of Englishness, unsettles the illusion of a monologic English history, and suggests that England is not a white ethnostate but a transnation with multiple histories and myths, a cross-racial and cross-cultural land.

Smith's adaptation of the *Wife of Bath* attests to Chaucer's contemporary relevance and continued presence. His stories and vividly characterized storytellers still inspire writers to push their creative boundaries. The "distance between the fourteenth century and the twenty-first looked epic," Smith admits, but after she wrote the play and attended its performance in the Kiln Theatre, she says she could see "Chaucer up there" on the stage and envisions herself "hiding in the folds of his garment" (*WW* xvi). Chaucer's garment, emblematically standing for his literary legacy, is a profuse and ever-evolving *textus* at once shaped by and perpetually shaping other texts. Every re-telling re-knits or reconstitutes parts of that garment, brings Chaucer and his work to life again both inside and outside the academy, and opens up alternative ways of teaching/reading Chaucer through the lens of adaptations.

Pedagogy and syllabi may need to be modified to enhance the study of Chaucer. Post-medieval adaptations of Chaucer could be incorporated into the classroom context to rekindle students' interest in the bard and reacquaint them with his work. This approach frees the poet from canonical criticism and opens his work to new viewpoints outside of the dominant readings. Pairing Chaucer with re-

tellings creates space for deeper debates about his writings. There are rich global vantage points from which to study, teach, and analyze Chaucer. Smith's *Wife of Willesden* could expressly be used to deepen students' appreciation and understanding of Chaucer's world and to inspire them to connect late medieval reality with contemporary themes. What is past is always a prologue.

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