



THE WIFE OF WILLESDEN

K THEATRE **L N**

A R E S O U R C E P A C K

THE WIFE OF WILLESDEN

A proper local legend. Married five times. Mother. Lover. Aunt. Friend. Alvita will tell her story to anyone in the pub – there's no shame in her game. The question is: are you ready to hear it? Because this woman's got the gift of the gab: she can rewrite mistakes into triumphs, turn pain into parables, and her love life's an epic poem. They call her The Wife of Willesden....

A play that celebrates the human knack for telling elaborate tales, especially about our own lives.

Critically acclaimed, multi-award winning, best-selling author Zadie Smith makes her playwriting debut, transporting Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath* to 21st Century North West London.

Director Indhu Rubasingham invites you to take your seat at the bar, order a pint or two, and listen to this bawdy, beautiful new comedy up close, and very, very personal.

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INTRODUCTION



***The Wife of Willesden** at Kiln Theatre provides a great opportunity for teachers and students to explore this contemporary adaptation of Chaucer's classic poem. Ideal for both students of Drama and Performing Arts, as well as those studying The Canterbury Tales' Wife of Bath as part of their English studies. The play and resources will bring the themes of Chaucer's classic story to life finding the contemporary resonances in Alvita's irrepressible, comic and uncompromising take on marriage, sex, and men and women's power in society.*



This resource has been designed to support teachers working with **A-Level Drama**, Performing Arts and English students.

The contents of the pack will support students in developing the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to create, perform and respond to drama and theatre through:

- Reflecting on their experience as an informed member of an audience of live theatre
- Understanding the social, historical and cultural context of the play
- Understanding how play texts can be interpreted and performed
- Understanding the interrelationship between writer, performer, designers and director
- Recognising and understanding the theatrical choices made by the creative team to create impact
- Analysing and evaluating the ways in which different performance and production elements are brought together to create The Wife of Willesden
- Developing understanding of the characters, themes and form of the play through practical exploration.

The contents also support the study of The Wife of Bath English specifications:

- AO1** Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression
- AO2** Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts
- AO3** Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received
- AO4** Explore connections across literary texts
- AO5** Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations



SUMMARY OF THE WIFE OF WILLESDEN

Zadie Smith's play is an adaptation of Chaucer's original transported into Willesden today. The author begins proceedings by introducing the play and the players.

AUTHOR:

*It was the summer of 2019.
I was back home, trying to write in between
Novels. In dire need of inspiration...
But Brent never fails in that direction
And the whole neighbourhood was in the streets
To celebrate the recent local feat:
Winning the London Borough of Culture.*

Rather than a group of pilgrims meeting at a London pub before they set off on their pilgrimage to Canterbury, The Wife of Willesden begins in the Colin Campbell pub where punters are celebrating Brent's year as borough of culture. Everyone is in high spirits and the publican, Polly, suggests a lock in and a story telling competition.

POLLY PUBLICAN:

*We'll have a little contest. Your stories
On that stage. I'll be the judge and MC.
And when everyone's told their tale, the best
One will receive a full English Breakfast
Tomorrow morning, on the house. With chips.*

AUTHOR:

*So off they went. Look
At them.
All telling their stories....
– they said what
They thought others wanted to hear. Or lied,
Or humble-bragged, or said the nice, polite
Clichéd things that nice people like to say .*

*Some said 'brave' things that took no bravery
To say, or were dull, or didn't move me –
Or spoke about their 'journeys' with an air
Of triumph. I was starting to despair . . .*

Alvita steps up. She is a natural storyteller. Just like Chaucer's Alysoun, she takes the floor and runs with it; a fast thinker and talker, she sweeps the crowd along with her and those that try to challenge her she deals with quickly and ruthlessly.

Before she tells her story Alvita sets the context for her tale with a prologue following the structure as Chaucer's original; starting with her defence of marriage and female sexuality; going on to describe marriage to her five husbands; and finishing with the story of the fight she has with her fifth husband over misogynist literature and her final dominance in their relationship.

Alvita is a larger than life character; vibrant, assured and unapologetic. Her targets (and victims) are those with power who might seek to restrict her freedom; the church and the patriarchy.

The punters in the Colin Campbell pub help bring Alvita's Prologue and Tale to life, enacting moments from her colourful life and stories. It's 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. The way on which Alvita is able to control the crowd and steer the argument to suit her thesis, is a key theme in the Wife of Willesden – have we been swept along and outwitted by the fast thinking, irrepressible 'Wife'?



Prologue part 1: virginity, purity and marriage

Alvita begins by stating her position on marriage, virginity and purity, she challenges Auntie P, a devout Christian, about where in the bible it prescribes women should only marry once.

She argues God doesn't expect everyone to be pure, she is accepting of her impurities.

*Despite what you see
Online, we're not all on yachts in Bali.
Some of us are on the ninety-eight bus
Which comes on time, and that's enough for us*

...

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.

Prologue part 2: On her five marriages

She talks of her marriages and tells of her first three husbands; older, they have less sex drive, but are more mature. For Alvita they are easy to manage and she relishes describing how she kept each in line and got what she wanted from the relationships – freedom and money to do as she wants.

She describes the way her fourth husband would try to control her, when she wanted to dress up, go out and party. She paints him as jealous and controlling. She conjures Nelson Mandela to remind her audience of the dangers of resentment. And while there were advantages for her in her fourth marriage – financial security and a level of freedom – she reveals that while still married she was already lining up number five.

Throughout her thesis on marriage Alvita happily gives out advice on how to handle men *'You've got to treat them mean, to keep them loving and humble and keen.'* She owns her skills to be lying, creative and manipulative - she's a realist, and good at playing the game of love and marriage. 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.

But is this all an act? She also reveals herself to be compassionate, to love the company of men and genuinely in pursuit of love and marriage.

Prologue part 3: the fifth husband

Her fifth husband is half her age, an Oxford student she meets through her friend Zaire. She is much more attracted to him, he is young and 'fresh in bed'. Besotted, in love, she signs over her car and two flats to him. But he is much harder to control.

Their relationship leads to violence when she challenges him when he forces her to listen to writings from contemporary men's rights – or anti-feminist, misogynist writers: Farrell, Moxon, Peterson, Strauss, as well as classic literary texts.

As in Chaucer's original, these writings portray women as the root of all trouble and evil in the world, beginning with Eve in the garden of Eden. What follows is a litany of men hating women from classical literature who deceive and destroy their men: Samson and Delilah, *'Deianir who set her man Hercules on fire'*, *'Socrates, whose wife poured piss on his head'*. Pasiphaë, Clytemnestra, Eriphyle, Livia and Lucilla, *'both of them were stone-cold husband killers'*.

Then finishing with 21st century news stories and memes of women who have destroyed men.

Provoked, Alvita tears the book and throws it in the fire and they fight. Ryan hits her, but when he sees her lying on the floor he begs for forgiveness. Alvita makes it clear that if she's to stay he must submit to her - she gets the car and flats put back in her name.

Her prologue concluded with this message of marital harmony restored, Alvita proclaims herself ready to tell her tale.

Pastor Jegede laughs at the length of the prologue and nearly gets into a fight with Bartosz, a Polish Bailiff who stands up for Alvita. Publican Polly steps in to break up the fight and they can continue.



The Wife of Willesden's tale

Chaucer's Wife of Bath Tale is set in the court of Arthurian Camelot. Smith transports her Tale to Jamaica, with the famous Queen Nanny who led a rebellion against the British colonialists and set up a rebel community of men and women who had escaped slavery.

It's the story of a young Maroon man who rapes a young Yoruba girl. He's condemned to death by the British authorities but Queen Nanny asks for them to hand him over to her jurisdiction so that she can decide whether he should be killed.

QUEEN NANNY

I'm interested in

Restorative justice. Understanding

Who you hurt and why.

So here is my deal:

You'll live - if you can tell me what we feel –

I mean we women. What we most desire.

You tell me that? I won't set you on fire.

She sets the challenge, if he can return after a year and tell her what it is women truly desire then he will be spared. The young Maroon encounters many women over the year who tell him what women want; riches, flattery, respect and freedom.

On his return, despairing that he hasn't yet found the answer, he comes across an old woman who tells him she will give him the answer and save his life if he agrees to her request. He agrees to the deal and returns to Queen Nanny he tells her:

The thing women want is basically this:

They want their husbands to consent, freely;

To submit to their wives' wills – which should be Natural in love; for we submit to love.

To keep power, and have no man above

Them – all women want this.

Having given the correct answer, he is saved and the old woman claims her payment; he must marry her. He kicks against it – she's old and ugly and from the ghetto.

I am a Maroon. We're imperious

People: we control our own destinies.

I can't marry a . . . hag. Nah, that ain't me.

The old woman challenges his sense of entitlement.

*You think because you born high,
And your fam'ly have money, by and by
That will make you a noble or good man?*

*Maroon boy, everybody knows the truth.
If all it took to be noble was roots
In some old family plot, then these clans
From H'england - with dey grand old posh
names and
Sugar wealth - they'd shine, all generations.
But he beat his wife. He ran plantation.*

The Maroon finally agrees to the wedding, with no way out of his promise. They tie his hands and cover his eyes and Alvita changes place with the Old Wife. So when they go to bed he finds himself with a beautiful, sexual, middle aged woman – not the beautiful young virgin of Chaucer's Arthurian original.

Retraction

Like Chaucer, Smith ends her play with the voice of the 'author'. She apologises for any inaccuracies or bias in her version of events and for any offence she may have caused with her 'crudity and cultural appropriation'.

And all credit to Chaucer if you liked it – he's the source of all the actual wisdom

... But, look, on the other hand, if it annoyed or offended you in some way, that's just a lack of finesse on my part, probably ... like, don't blame Chaucer ... I take full responsibility.....



IN THE REHEARSAL ROOM

ZADIE SMITH

WRITER

When I first began this attempt at Chaucerian translation, I thought I was writing a monologue. But almost immediately this proved impossible. At various moments in the original, Alyson speaks to the Pardoner, the Summoner, and the Friar, and once I'd let three extra people on to the stage, I couldn't think of a good reason why there shouldn't be more. For as well as talking to quite a few people, the Wife of Bath talks about many more. She is a voracious narrator: mimicking people, quoting them, animating them, bringing them to life and killing them off within a paragraph. So why not let St Paul appear in the flesh, and all Alysons husbands and friends, and Christ himself! When typing on a laptop in a study facing a wall, the possibilities can appear endless. In the rehearsal room, things turned out to be a little more complicated.

Scenes it had amused me to write back-to-back - like a wedding following hard on a funeral, or a story of one marriage bookended by two others - became, for the director and our ten actors, a complicated choreography of music, emotion, quick changes, voice transformations, and, well, choreography. I have playwright friends who tell me nothing delights them more than forcing ten strangers to repeat words they have written. I have to say that was not my first reaction. It was more like: All these lovely people are here at 10.30 in the morning - and it's my fault. Very soon, though, this sense of mortification passed, and something like vocational awe replaced it. I felt a great humility before the startling openness of actors, their playfulness and generosity and unselfconscious freedom - so different from writers! Their visual and physical imaginations. The creativity

they seem to hold in their gestures, in their very beings. Rhyming word games are one thing; embodiment is quite another. And it's been my delight to watch our director Indhu Rubasingham create a vivid theatrical reality out of my static sentences.

I suppose writers like me, who work a lot with dialogue, are always to some degree actor manqués, secretly convinced they could, if asked, "do all the voices" themselves. But the moment our extraordinary flesh-and-blood-Alvita opened her mouth in the rehearsal room! Then that demented fantasy fell away. Not in my wildest dreams could I have heard, in my head, all the emotion, humour, intelligence and drama I've been privileged to see happen in front of me, every day, in the rehearsal room...



The layers of experience and sensation available in the theatre should be the envy of all novelists. My first glimpse of the ingenious set demonstrated the difference. In one glance I could take in, entire, what it would have taken me three pages to describe. Not to mention sounds effects, music, dancing, costumes! In the end, the rhyming verse becomes mere scaffolding, over which is laid all the three-dimensional richness of sound and movement, light and shade, the human voice, the human body. And yet: I also felt the miracle of text, in the rehearsal room. That 600-year-old jokes can still land is a humbling fact indeed.

Of course, Chaucer could not have imagined the manner in which we have re-embodied his lines (although the man who gave, to his Wife of Bath, the line “Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit/I took no kep, so that he liked me” may not be as far from as our contemporary sensibilities as we sometimes imagine.) I felt the presence, in the rehearsal room, of Chaucer’s humour and bawdiness, his philosophical depth and intellectual perversity. All transformed by the process of passing through these various flesh-and-blood actors, with their human voices and human gestures, with which they are able to perform the miracle of turning text into experience, words into action, ideas into something like ‘life.’



CONTEXT AND THEMES OF THE PLAY (AND CHAUCER'S ORIGINAL)



Social and political context

Geoffrey Chaucer was born in the early 1340's, most probably 1343.

Chaucer's great grandfather is thought to have been a tavern keeper, his grandfather a merchant and his father a prosperous wine merchant supplying wine to the King's household.

As a boy Chaucer was given work as a page boy in the royal household. Chaucer then moved into the world of diplomacy and was sent to Spain, France and Italy on official business. Over the years he worked as a courtier, a diplomat, and a civil servant, as well as working for the king from 1389 to 1391 as Clerk of the King's Works

This was a period of social mobility and Chaucer's own family illustrate this through a few generations from his great grandfather as a tavern keeper, to his own career as part of the Royal household and his marriage to Philippa Pan (or de Roet) a lady in the household of Edward 111's wife.

The Canterbury Tales was written just after England had been hit by the Black Death. Over a third of the population died and as a result peasants and workers were able to demand more rights. This was a time of social mobility, with increasing opportunities for women, particularly widows. The Wife of Bath represents a new kind of capitalist, entrepreneurial woman, that was emerging in the textile industry.

The power of the Monarchy and the Church were also unstable and under pressure at this time – so Chaucer was writing in a period of great change, when the stability of institutions and status and authority were altered and challenged.

Zadie Smith's Wife of Willesden roots her adaptation in the London we inhabit today. While women have more rights and economic power, equality is still contested and to be realised.

The diverse population of North West London is represented in the play.

The people listening in the Colin Campbell pub are from 'church, temple, mosque, shul' - united by the fact that they are all 'local.' This community has a strong identity of its own, an identity marked by the 'North Weezy' accent, but it also embraces and celebrates many different origin points, religions, and ethnicities. Countries such as Jamaica, Nigeria, or Bangladesh are marked as part of British identity, as places whose histories have constructed modern Britain just as much as the imagined Arthurian past of Britain itself.

Marion Turner
Professor of English Literature, Jesus College,
University of Oxford

Sexuality, Dominance and Marriage

*I'm one of these Venus-born girls for real,
But I've also got this Mars side? I feel
Like Venus gave me my lust and passion,
But Mars made me a woman of action.
Basically I'm Venus with Mars rising,
Which is why I don't get this 'slut-shaming'?*

The Wife of Willesden challenges views of how women should behave with relish. She takes on the misogynists and argues for a woman's right to be sexual, follow their desires and pleasure without shame and to have agency over their own lives. As in Chaucer's Wife, much of the sex described in the Wife of Willesden has little to do with desire and a lot to do with power.

Her primary message is about consent and agency; that what women want in is the freedom to determine their own lives, or in Chaucer's language 'sovereignty'.

The Medieval Church regarded women as dangerously sexual creatures. Medieval science viewed them as *'having cold bodies which constantly desired contact with the heat of the male.'* (citation)

Neither Alvita nor The Wife of Bath are offended by this view of women, rather they glory in it and will not apologise or try to repress what they regard as natural. For marriage to work men must accept and accommodate this.

Narrative techniques

Chaucer bestows Alysoun with great powers of rhetoric. She begins by declaring that she needs no authority other than her own experience. From the beginning she challenges the idea that she needs to cite greater authorities, key thinkers or writers, to support her argument.

Smith also declares Alvita's intention to speak from experience to make her case.

*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!*

Like Chaucer's Alysoun she is *'A natural talker rushing from one topic to the next giving the impression that if we do not understand what is going on, then we are the ones at fault'*. York notes.

Both Alysoun and Alvita focus on power and pleasure and their right to agency and to determine their own morality. With an assured command of the narrative, both employ a trick of debate men often use - only presenting one side of the argument. Along with the habit of 'glosing' or interpreting the bible and other key texts and twisting an interpretation to suit themselves. *The wife is an expert 'glossator' capable of twisting scripture for her own purposes.* York notes.

Ambiguity and irony

The Wife of Willesden is a comedy, with larger than life, and stereotypical characters. Chaucer's pilgrims conform to the tradition of 'Estates satire', 'where social types are presented with their characteristic traits and flaws'. (OCR notes) The Wife of Willesden similarly plays with these comic and stereotypical depictions of recognisable types.

The Wife of Bath can be considered within the tradition on Carnival, a time where the social order is turned upside down and disorder reigns:

'one advantage of an approach that concentrates on the Wife's abundant joix-de-vivre is that the reader can postpone, possibly transcend, some of the moral dilemmas that she raises. Carnival does not endorse or condemn sensuality and disorder so much as recognise them, allow their release: it is Lent's 'other', providing solace after the wilderness of temptation.' OCR

All the traditional ideas about medieval women are brought sharply into focus in the course of the Wife of Bath's prologue and Tale. But it is a matter of debate whether they are destroyed or strengthened in the course of the Wife's comic antics.

The question for the audience of The Wife of Willesden is how far can we trust Alvita's account of things? To what extent does Zadie Smith want us to support her actions and opinions? When she embraces the stereotypes of a 'gold-digger', or a lying and deceitful wife, looking out for her own interests, what should we believe and to what extent are we meant to support her world view?





Anti- women literature.

The Wife of Bath asks 'Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?'

Referring to a painting depicting a lion, which represents woman, lying at the feet of St Jerome who has tamed this wild creature. The Wife turns the argument on its head asking what would happen if the if the lion had painted the picture, it would tell a different story.

Alvita also takes control of stories from anti-women literature which describe women as dangerously sexual, irrational, emotional and the root of all trouble; starting with Eve in the garden of Eden and progressing through a range of classic texts.

The messages about misogyny that are central to the Wife of Bath still resonate in Smith's play. In Chaucer's text, the Wife of Bath's husband obsessively reads from a book about hating women, a book called the 'book of wicked wives.' In The Wife of Willesden, the book has mutated into a collection of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century books (such as Jordan Peterson's Twelve Rules for Life and Neil Strauss's The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pick-Up Artists). 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.

Marion Turner, Professor of English Literature, Jesus College, University of Oxford

Language and style

The Wife of Bath and The Wife of Willesden both use colloquial language, full of images, proverbs and expressions which are used in familiar talk and local dialects. This is the language of the streets, of the people; direct, rich, varied and accessible.

Chaucer wrote The Canterbury Tales in English which, in the 14th Century, was the language of ordinary literate people. In Chaucer's time Latin was the written language read by educated scholars and Norman French was still the language of the courts, so in choosing to write The Canterbury Tales in English, Chaucer was aware of who he wanted to hear his stories. York notes

Queen Nanny

Queen Nanny was a rebel leader in Jamaica during the early 18th century. It is thought that she came from the Ashanti tribe of present-day Ghana, where she was captured and brought on a slave ship to Jamaica to work on a plantation.

Nanny, along with her brothers, escaped from the plantations, and set up a rebel community in the Blue Mountains, which became known as Nanny Town. The rebel people in this community were called Windward Maroons, led by Nanny, they made numerous raids to free other slaves held on plantations. It is widely accepted that her efforts contributed to the escape of almost 1,000 slaves over her lifetime.

She is famed for her skill in guerrilla warfare against the British during the First Maroon War (1720 to 1739). Queen Nanny was killed by the British in this war in 1733.

DESIGN INFORMATION

ASSOCIATE COSTUME DESIGNER

KINNETIA ISIDORE

How important are the choice of costumes in this piece?

The best costumes are things you don't notice at all. Think about going to the theatre and an actor walking on stage for the first time. You probably don't even think about what they're wearing unless it's a historical costume, and that's a sign of successful costume design.

The Wife of Willesden is a play full of so many different characters, the 10 actors all multi-role. There are 46 characters in total if you really break the play down. Costume in this production is vital to help the audience differentiate between characters throughout to help tell the story. One of the actors, Marcus, goes from playing a middle-aged Rastafarian man, to black Jesus, to Nelson Mandela, to a husband in an ancient Greek tragedy to a lady in 1720s Jamaica! He has several very subtle but important costume changes to tell us things like the time period we're in, the location, his status and his personality.



What do you hope the choice of costumes will communicate to the audience?

The hope is that the audience will know exactly which character each actor is playing as soon as they have a costume change. The set grounds us in a hyper-realistic setting and the other elements of design really help take us out of this when we need to. The costume jumps from contemporary casual pub wear to ancient Greek togas then to 1720s Jamaica. We hop around the globe a bit through the ages and costume keeps us grounded and helps the audience know when and where we are.

Most of these costume changes happen on stage, live, in front of the audience so we were limited in how much we could achieve and what items of clothing we could change. I also hope the costumes will help make everybody laugh. Although the play touches on some important issues it's hilarious throughout and many of the costumes add to the humour of the piece and really help bring to dramatise some of the larger-than-life moments in the play.

The storyteller, Alvita, and the other actors often break the fourth wall and talk to the audience, taking themselves out of the world of the play and into the reality of the theatre setting. The costumes at key moments also break the fourth wall with actors sometimes rolling their eyes at yet another change and finding items of costume hidden cleverly in bits of the set.

Is there anything more you would like to share about working on this production?

It's been brilliant fun and a challenge to try and keep everything in the same world and marry the costumes to the feeling of the text. It's also been a very collaborative production. The creative team spent a long time glossing over the larger-than-life moments in the production trying to figure out if it would be a lighting change or a sound effect or a costume change that would give the audience what they needed. In the costume team I worked closely with my supervisor, Rianna Azoro, our costume maker, Maiya Alladice and our wardrobe manager, Keshini Ranasinghe, to make sure that things were communicated between us. There are lots of costumes and lots of changes to keep track of and we really worked as a team to make sure everything made sense and the actors could keep track of when and where their changes were happening and exactly which bench their next jacket was hidden on onstage!

“

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”

INSIGHT



LIGHTING DESIGN- GUY HOARE

My initial ideas were based on the conceit that the whole room - stage and auditorium - are part of the pub and I wanted to have the ability to light both equally to blur any boundary between the two.

Inevitably more of the action happens on "stage" largely due to sightlines but many of my starting ideas came from approaching the piece as if it were fully in the round.

I am really embracing theatricality in its broadest sense. Once Alvita embarks on her tale (or in fact its prologue) I feel every trick in the theatrical book is open to her. The design is not going to be constrained by naturalism or even a cinematic realism. It will be quite honest in its artificiality.

I think these principles will be apparent to an extent from the outset but the gestures will get grander and bolder as the tale progresses, so by the time the tale properly begins and we are transported to Jamaica we are a really long way from the world of the pub whilst never having physically left it.


SET DESIGN- Robert Jones

Designing The Wife of Willesden has been an exciting challenge. Inspiration has been drawn from many places and we've reimagined the recognisable Kiln auditorium into a high road pub, using a con guration never done before in this building. We have recreated that infamous sticky carpet feeling to bring audiences right into the pub atmosphere by using a combination of makes, found and recycled items from real pubs.





ACTIVITIES FOR THE DRAMA STUDIO AND THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM



Activities provided aim to give teachers and students creative ideas for exploring the Wife of Willesden before or after their visit to The Kiln Theatre. They give suggestions for practical, exploratory exercises that will deepen student's engagement with the experience of seeing the play and draw conceptual and thematic comparisons with Chaucer's classic text.

LESSON ONE

Developing narrative skills

A play that celebrates the human knack for telling elaborate tales, especially about our own lives.

Aims:

- *to explore the art of storytelling – the Wife of Willesden is rooted in a competition to tell the best story*
- *to build on the idea of personal, or lived experience and referencing experts, or authorities in a story or argument*
- *to look at rhetorical techniques*

Alvita makes of virtue of speaking from experience. She says doesn't need respected texts to make her argument, all she needs is her direct experience of the world to tell it how it is. But then she draws on the teachings of the bible and other classic texts to make her case, revealing her dexterity in twisting or reinterpreting those texts – at times making them up - to suit her own purposes.

Three warm up activities are suggested below; you could choose to run one or more with your students – each one has a slightly different focus.

Warm up activity 1: observing human behaviour and creating a narrative

- ◆ Start by asking the students to shake hands (or greet) everyone in the room in one minute.
- ◆ Now ask them to find a partner nearest to them and ask each person to share something they observed on their way into school this morning. This can be the smallest interaction that caught their eye, model with an example from your own journey in, for example; 'I noticed a delivery van park badly leaving hazard lights on, a man gets out and walk at a leisurely pace to a door with a parcel.'
- ◆ Move around the room and find another partner and repeat. People can use the same example again adding detail and refining their description, or they might choose a new memory suggested by something they heard from someone else. If you have time repeat this a number of times, focussing on recall of events and building detail that brings the moments to life.

- ◆ Bring the class back together and hear some of the examples people have shared. Draw out any physical descriptions - clothing or physicality; their stance, body language, facial expressions and behaviour.
- ◆ Discuss whether students made any assumptions or judgements based on what they observed. Did they create back-story, or imply assumptions about character in their re-telling?
- ◆ Reflect on how they were able to tell a story or paint a picture based on fleeting observations, noticing how we build a picture of what is true and the place of subjectivity and objectivity in this.
- ◆ Both Chaucer and Smith, in their retractions, acknowledge that what they report is their personal perspective. How they describe people and the motivations they attribute to them are formed from their particular perspective, or world view. How reliable are they?

Warm up activity 2: two truths and a lie

- ◆ Ask students to think of three things about themselves; two are true, one is a lie.
- ◆ Move into pairs or small groups and tell each other their three things. The challenge is for those telling to be as convincing as they possibly can, and the others to work out which is the lie.
- ◆ Alternatively, you could ask one student to tell the whole class and together work out which one you think is the lie, asking them a series of questions to draw out more detail.
- ◆ Reflect on what people said that was convincing, if you could tell if someone was making something up and what kind of lies worked best – maybe they chose a lie that seems plausible, in contrast to truths that sound unbelievable.
- ◆ Talk about what else helped make a person convincing; body language, voice, eye contact etc and whether there were any 'tells' that gave away when people were lying.

Warm up activity 3: Whose story is it?

- ◆ A similar warm up exercise is to ask students to move into small groups and ask each one to tell a story to the others. You could pick a theme – ‘worst family day out’ for example.
- ◆ Then ask groups to choose one of their stories to tell the rest of the class, each person telling as if it were their own experience.
- ◆ Bring out chairs for the ‘storytellers’ and ask each to briefly summarise the story as if it were their own.
- ◆ The class can then question each of the storytellers in attempt to establish the real owner of the story. Those telling a story that isn’t their own will need to improvise and embellish under questioning.
- ◆ Reflect on what in the storytellers’ versions of the story were convincing and how they managed to create a sense of authenticity.



Improvisation – ‘Authorities’ experts in their field

Alvita (and Alysoun) both begin the prologue, and the argument they are making, by claiming they don’t need to draw on theories or accepted learning to make their case, they can do that purely through speaking from experience.

However, they then go on to draw on traditional texts to twist them to their own purpose. Quoting from the Bible, the works of St Jerome, or referencing anti-women literature, they prove themselves more than adept at speaking from these positions of ‘authority’. Chaucer’s Alysoun is ‘master’ of this, at times her quotes are inaccurate, but the confidence with which she makes her assertions means she wins the point before anyone realises and she’s onto her next topic.

This improvisation exercise asks students to speak as if they are authorities, or experts, on a subject and win the audience through the confidence in which they present their argument.

Stage 1:

- ◆ Ask a student (or pair) to take the floor and speak as world authority on a subject you give them. This could be anything you choose - astrophysics, genetic finger printing, the life of a sea urchin, theatre in the 9th century, wig making in the film industry, for example.
- ◆ You could give them a flip chart to use on which they can write up key phrases and draw diagrams to support their presentation. This is a playful activity - none of what they say needs to be true, they just need to hold the floor as if they know what they are talking about. They can be as silly or absurd as they want, they can make up words and concepts. Their job is to look and sound convincing; it’s about commitment, confidence and conveying a sense of authority.
- ◆ After their initial (2 minute) presentation take questions from the floor, requiring them to improvise further in response to a range of questions.
- ◆ When everyone has had a go, reflect on what they were doing that made them look or sound authoritative even if they were speaking nonsense.

Body language

Voice

Language

Any key arguments they made that sounded convincing

Stage 2:

◆ Now give students (either in pairs or small groups) a subject to speak on and some words and phrases to include in their talk. (Resource 1).

◆ This activity can be run in two ways: Either give students some time to prepare a few ideas in advance and familiarise themselves with some of the words and phrase in their talk. Or you could pre-prepare a power point with the title of their talk followed by slides of some key concepts and ask students to improvise as new terms appear on the IWB (or prepared flip chart) in the moment.

The title of their talks are:

- Marriage in the 1400's and the present day
- The Canterbury Tales

Again, they may have little or no knowledge of the subject of their talk and can invent meanings and arguments in response to the title, words and phrases they have been allocated.

◆ Challenge them to combine plain speaking, giving a sense of their, or others, lived experience, with some professional, technical, or expert language (including the phrases included in resource 1) with which they might dazzle or distract their audience. There is no expectation for them to be accurate, their success will depend on their level of energy and commitment to carry their argument through.

◆ After running the exercise discuss what made the students sound authoritative in their talks, where they were making sense, and when they were able to make it appear that they knew what they were talking about.

◆ After completing the exercise, you could go on to research the true meaning of some of the words and concepts provided and the source material for these talks.



LESSON TWO

Creating monologues

Aims:

- *to write monologues for characters in The Wife of Willesden*
- *to consider the idea of stereotypes and more individual, complex character depictions*
- *to reflect on different perspectives in story telling - who controls the narrative and whose version is being told?*

Chaucer and Smith both acknowledge that their poem or play is told from their perspective; they respond to what they see in the world, then control the narrative and put words into the mouths of the people in the stories they tell.

This activity gives students the opportunity to explore the idea of telling a story from the other characters in the play's perspectives. The Wife of Willesden commands the stage and tells her Prologue and Tale with an irrepressible momentum – barely giving her opponents or detractors time to think or speak.

This activity would work well after seeing the play, giving students a chance to reflect on the other characters and give voice to their opinions or version of events.

Stage 1:

- ◆ Introduce the idea that the people gathered in the pub are representative of a broad sweep of society found in Brent in the 21st century. Some say a great deal about what they think and feel, others are quieter and have less to say – unlike Alvita they don't all like the spotlight and are more reticent about sharing their opinions, thoughts and feelings.
- ◆ Ask students to choose one of the other characters in the play to write a monologue for, giving their version of events, or expressing their take on the issues being discussed and stating what is important to them. Students can work on their own, or in small groups to develop their monologue.
- ◆ When they have chosen a character they would like to work with, ask them to think about what they remember from the play and make notes about:
 - How would you physically describe the character, including reflecting on the costume choices the designer made for each and what you feel this tells us about the character
 - What you remember about what Alvita had to say about the character?
 - Did your chosen character try to counter Alvita's version of events, or challenge her arguments in the play?
 - How were they depicted in the production; as comic stereotypes or more rounded, complex characters?
 - What do you think they might want to say if they were given the floor?

Stage 2:

◆ Now give students the character cards provided (resource 2) that remind students of; what we know about the characters which will help build a picture of them; what Alvita says about them when she is in control of the narrative; and what they have to say about themselves.

(Not all characters have been included in resource 2 - students may want to work on some of the smaller characters in this activity in which case they will need to rely on what they remember from the production – sometimes the quieter characters can be the most revealing.)

◆ Ask students to write a monologue for their chosen character. This may take the form of a **right to reply** – a counter or challenge to Alvita's version of events, or a **confessional** – an admission of their failings and what they have learnt or understood in the process of witnessing Alvita's story. Ask them to focus on the themes of Alvita's Prologue and Tale:

Marriage and love

Relationships between men and women

Power, control, freedom and agency

What is important in life

◆ They may want to write their monologues keeping close to events and arguments Alvita highlights in the play, or they might imagine and tell a completely new story that illustrates their argument or understanding in response to one of the themes.

◆ Think about the portrayal of characters in terms of stereotypes or fully rounded characters. Chaucer and Smith do both; portraying archetypal characters and finding ways to reveal a more complex understanding of their motivations.

Stage 3:

◆ Perform or read the monologues as a whole class and reflect on the different perspectives and arguments being put forward. How do they increase our understanding of the Wife of Willesden's prologue and Tale and the arguments explored in the production in relation to marriage, the relationships between women and men, the role of the Church .

Extension:

◆ You could hot seat the characters in turn and question them about their opinions on Alvita, the arguments she makes and whether they have a different version of events described in the play.

◆ Set up a TV style panel show in which a range of characters (from the play, or from life) are brought together to discuss 'Is the Wife of Willesden a good role model for women in 2021?'

Resource 1:

Marriage in 1400's and present day

Reading the banns

Parental consent at 16

No parental consent needed

Witnesses required

No witnesses required

Gretna Green

Divorce not recognised

Marriage between different classes frowned upon

Ywedded

Octogamie

For office and for ese

Civil partnership

Same sex marriage

Marriage as a holy sacrament representing the union of Christ and the Church

Common law marriage

Licenced premises

Marriage could take place anywhere; at home, in bed, in the street

Handfasting

Notes:

- Marriage in the 1400's was less formalised than it is in the 21st century. Sex before marriage was prohibited and if an engaged couple had sex they were considered married.
- Handfasting was legally binding: as soon as the couple made their vows to each other they were validly married. Just as with church weddings of the period, the union which handfasting created could only be dissolved by death.
- In the 1400's it was possible to be married anywhere, it didn't need to be in a church or licenced premises and it wasn't a requirement to have witnesses present and it parental consent wasn't required.
- However, this made it difficult to prove or contest if a marriage had taken place and made divorce complicated.
- In 1215 the reading of the Banns was introduced; the intention of marriage was proclaimed three times giving anyone who objected to the marriage the opportunity to come forward.

'During medieval times weddings did not take place inside the Church. Weddings occurred at the church door – which given the climate in England probably accounts for the number of porches within medieval church architecture. The marriage at the church door was a curious amalgam of vows and financial arrangements. The ring that the bride wears today is all that is left of the symbolism of the

groom's symbolic gift of gold or silver given to represent the bride's dowry..... The couple exchanged vows in English. And did I mention that a priest wasn't needed even if the couple did get married at the church door! Of course having a priest made it easier to prove you were married.

Dixon Smith explains that consent to a marriage or a pledge to marry was shown by giving and receiving an item referred to in English as a 'wed'. A 'wed' could be any gift understood by those involved to mean consent to marry but was often a ring. A 'wedding' where a man gave a woman a ring and she accepted it created the marriage.

All very straight forward except it wasn't! Leyser goes on to reveal that during the Middle Ages couples got married all over the place – from trees to inns.

The promise of marriage followed by intercourse was marriage and recognized as such by the Church. So despite the fact that secret marriages were prohibited, the Church recognised that people could and did get married without the consent of either the Church, their parents or their overlords. Law required the irregular or clandestine marriage to be regularised before any children could inherit but the marriage was legally binding even if there were no witnesses, no banns and none of the above negotiations. No priest was required for an irregular marriage either. This makes either proving or disproving such a union rather difficult'.

The History Jar

The Canterbury Tales

Estates satire

Social types are presented with their characteristic traits and flaws

Carnival

spiritual goal of pilgrimage

bawdy tales and secular romances

romance, fabliau and other genres

an autobiography, a confession, a lecture, a sermon, a harangue

debate, not didactic presentation or even wise synthesis

reduce an ambiguous, “dialogic” text to a “monologic” right reading.

The Knight’s Tale

The Miller’s Tale

The Nun’s Tale

Auctoritee

Axe

Sondry wise

Glose

Wrothe

Disputio

Notes

Estates satire - ‘where social types are presented with their characteristic traits and flaws’.

OCR

Carnival, a time where the social order is turned upside down and disorder reigns.

The Canterbury Tales includes bawdy tales and romances, and fabliau (short, humorous, bawdy tale). We might expect the Wife of Bath to tell a fabliau, but instead she chooses a romance.

Auctoritee – written authority; the bible or the writings of the great philosophers

Axe - ask

Sondry wise – different ways

Glose – interpreting texts

Wrothe – anger

Disputio – Debate

A wood leon – a mad lion



Resource 2:

AUNTIE P

What we know about Auntie P:

- She's an observant Christian who knows her bible
- She believes in the sanctity of marriage
- She is critical of sexualised behaviour and believes the bible teaches abstinence

AUNTIE P

*Ya nah know Christ
Him a wedding guest one time in
him life?
In Cana, Galilee? So please,
niece, tell me
How come you believe you can
get wedded
Five times? Lahd knows how
many times bedded!
All I know is that the Lord God
he nah
Like looseness. He defends de
marriage bonds.*

ALVITA

*Yeah, but Auntie, the thing is,
that's just wrong?
Where do you think you read
that? The Good Book?
You can't show it to me. S'not
there. I've looked.*

AUNTIE P

*I know he commanded virginity.
Best to sleep with no one!
You like to argue with me up and
down
But I believe our . . . private parts
. . . they around
For two purpose. Passing the . . .
urine. And
Knowing who is woman and who
is man.*

PASTOR JEGEDE

What we know about Pastor Jegede:

- He is one of Alvita's main opponents, he tries to undermine her, laughing at the length of her prologue
- He argues for chastity and purity
- He talks about poverty as a way to achieve humility and nobility
- He is well dressed and has an expensive watch/jewellery. He collects money while Queen Nanny discusses privilege and poverty

Zadie Smith gives us some clear clues about the Pastor in her stage directions.

PASTOR JEGEDE – *who we might notice looks conspicuously wealthy, with many gold rings and chains – stands on a table to give his smug homily, and CHURCH USHERS move around the Colin Campbell with plates, collecting money from variously willing people.*

The collection finished, he notices the OLD WIFE waiting for a blessing, and gives her a cursory one – though he seems more interested in the plate that is being returned to him and which he now smoothly empties into his pockets, before sitting back down, satisfied.

PASTOR JEGEDE

*We aim for chastity. This is the prize.
The contest is to be pure in God's eyes.
It is clearly
Said, by the apostle, that purity
Is best.
But if you marry someone –
And this is true for our women and our men –
It is best never to have sex with them.*

PASTOR JEGEDE

*One great blessing of poverty is when
A thief comes near a poor man, well, then,
That poor man has no reason to worry.
No thief comes to his door! He'll be merry!
Yes, in some ways it's awful, poverty.
But it's motivating! Keeps you busy.
It can be very educational
Especially if you are rational
And patient in accepting it.
And often poverty brings you so low
It actually brings you to God!*



KELLY

What we know about Kelly:

- She is Auntie P's daughter so has grown up in a Christian household
- Zadie Smith describes Kelly in the stage directions as: Alvita's very nerdy, shy and put-upon niece

KELLY

But that's not, like, meant for . . . well, like, maybe –

ALVITA

Yes, girl – g'wan – Say it! (That's my niece, Kelly.)

KELLY

*Maybe that's not meant for everybody?
Like, Mum, maybe God makes some people true
Saints, yeah? But with some he's like: s'up to you . . .
Like, I totally get Jesus was pure
And he was into that but are you sure
It's got to be like that for me and you?
Later when discussing 'what it is women desire':*

KELLY

*Above
All things, we want freedom. Freedom to know
Our own desires. We want to follow
Them where they lead.*

ZAIRE

What we know about Zaire:

- She is Alvita's best friend
- She introduces Alvita to Ryan, they go to Oxford together and spend time with Ryan; going to student parties, drinking, and dancing.
- Alvita confides in Zaire her plan to line Ryan up as husband number five
- Zaire is present at husband number four's funeral where Alvita acts the part of the grieving widow, but both know she has number five lined up.

ZAIRE

*But just cos you have working genitals
We don't have to go down the kid road? All
Of us don't need babies. It's cool if your
Road is kids. But that's not all these are for.
Tell us no, we're all over it, we're set:
But come on strong? We lose interest, all bets
Are off. Play hard to get, and we'll chase you,
But act too keen? Then I'm just not that into
You. Masochism, some say, but isn't it
Also just how things work in a market?
Love is capital: this, smart women know.*

COLIN

What we know about Colin:

- Colin is a 'chugger' – he collects for a Charity on the streets
- He is recently engaged to Sophy

COLIN

Hello . . . well, my name's Colin . . . I work for—

ALVITA

You hassle fools in the street for cash – sure –

COLIN

Well, actually I raise money to fight—

ALVITA

*You get their sort codes. Make them feel all right
About themselves. Mug them for a good cause.
But tell me: how can I help you and yours?*

COLIN

*Um . . . well, this is Sophy, we just got engaged . . .
And a lot of what you said tonight made
Me feel a bit anxious, if I'm honest.*

ALVITA

Is it. Go on . . . I don't bite, I promise.

COLIN

*Like, are you saying that if I marry
She owns me? I find that a bit scary –
Like, in my view, that's taking things a bit
Too far, like: sexism – but reversing it?*

ALVITA

*I'm about to drop knowledge on you,
Colin, and on your lovely girlfriend, too.
Because I've been there, Colin; this ain't my
First rodeo. And 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.
Best thing you can do? Sit up and listen.*

COLIN

*Yes, ma'am – I mean, Miss – I mean, Mrs – Miz?
Of course, I know you know your business,
Wife of Willesden – I shouldn't interrupt.
You know what? I'll own my privilege – and shut up.*

FIRST THREE HUSBANDS – DARREN, WINSTON, IAN

What we know about the first three husbands:

- They were all older than Alvita when she married them
- She describes them as good husbands and easy to manage
- When each of them died she married the next

ALVITA

*But the older dogs are less
Inclined to learn; they want to get their rest.
Fine. But I still ruled them with a firm hand.
I cussed them daily, and they'd understand,
And be grateful, so relieved, when I turned
Nice. And that's one key thing I have learned
About marriage. You've got to treat them mean
To keep them loving and humble and keen.
Let me break it down: when a husband
Shows his cards; you've got to hide your hand.
Before he gets on your case, get on his.
I'd be like: first thing, handle your business.
What were you doing at that girl's place?
Are you really going to say to my face:*

HUSBAND DARREN

Alvita accuses Darren of wandering eyes and double standards.

DARREN

*I went to check my cousin – he's crashing there.
Didn't really notice . . . what's her name? Claire?*

ALVITA

*Bruv, I've seen her: fake nails, fake boobs, fake hair –
You're gonna do me like that? Is that fair?
And then meanwhile, if I'm just jamming
With a male friend, you're sure we're banging,
You lose your mind, cuss me up and down . . .
Double standard! But that's what I've found
About husbands. They chat too much breeze
About women. Got way too many theories.
I've heard them all.*

HUSBAND WINSTON

*Don't trust a gold digger;
They've got plans for you. Them fine figures
Are a trap, yuh know? Dey gwan reel you in.
You'll pay in cash; it's the wages of sin.
Not love they want, man, it's alimony.
The thing women love most is money.*

HUSBAND IAN

*Avoid the ones with money:
They'll emasculate you. When a man
Earns less than his wife you'll find he can't
Respect himself. That's not just my view,
That's in evolutionary science, too.
They're drawn to power like bears to honey!*

HUSBAND NUMBER FOUR: ELDRIDGE

What we know about Eldridge:

- Eldridge had an issue with jealousy
- Alvita found him more difficult to manage, but she did have the flats and cars put into her name
- When still married to him she went off to Cambridge to party with Zaire and Ryan, she lined up Ryan while Eldridge was still alive
- She mourned him at his funeral, but was planning marriage number five with Ryan

ELDRIDGE

*The thing about women is they
Act a certain way up until the day
You wed. Then it's a whole other story.
New becomes old. Fresh becomes boring.
The pink cammy gets switched for grey cotton . . .
All that tear-your-clothes-off sex? Forgotten.
When a man buys clothes
He gets to try stuff on before he goes
And buys it. With wives? You roll the dice and see!
The truth is you love the sound
Of men singing your praises. You call
Yourself a feminist but you want all
The compliments all the time. If you say
How does this look? am I free to lay
It on the line?*

*For your birthday you want a ball.
You want me to hire out Camden Palais
And pay for it all.
Please God tell me you're not
Going out in that. The skirt's way too small;
The top's too low; you're barely dressed at all.
I'm just saying sometimes you look like a—*

ALVITA

*People of Brent: you hear how he talks when
He's pissed? Well, I told him he said that then
I used it against him. He never found
Out it wasn't true – I just wrote it down
And said he did. That poor fool got no peace.
I told student Ryan, and Kelly, my niece,
And they believed me and blamed him; he looked
Like the bad guy and I'm off the hook.
Simple advice, Colin, it'll take you far:
Whoever's behind the wheel drives the car.*

HUSBAND ELDRIDGE

*I said sorry for things I hadn't done!
Girls I never touched, game I never run.*

ALVITA

*I knew you too ol' to be playing away
But I accused you of it anyway
Because you liked it! You needed jealousy
To feel I wanted you like you wanted me . . .*

HUSBAND ELRIDGE

*And I truly believed.
Couldn't stand to see her with another man!*

ALVITA

*Jealousy fried you in your own damn pan!
Oh, I made you a proper hell on earth . . .
This man who bitched like he was in childbirth
If he even stubbed a toe. Not good with pain
That one.*

HUSBAND ELRIDGE

*And God knows she made me insane
With agony.*

RYAN

What we know about Ryan:

- Whilst Alvita describes him as the worst husband, she also was in love with him and was physically attracted to him
- Ryan is 20 years younger than Alvita, an Oxford graduate
- Ryan follows the writings of Peterson, Farrell,, figures in the men's movement who feel feminism has gone too far
- Alvita and Ryan fight over his book of men's teachings. This violent exchange, in which Ryan hits her, ends with reconciliation when he apologises to her and she insists that he

ALVITA

My fifth husband. Okay, here we go. Well, I actually don't hope he rots in hell. And yet, to be honest, he was the worst. He'd get physical with me. That's the first And last time I'll let that happen, I swear. Raised his voice At me over every likkle ting, left Me no freedom.

HUSBAND RYAN

If I let my wife wander around Brent On Halloween, dressed like a 'slutty witch', What does that make me? Basically, her bitch.

HOW OTHER'S DESCRIBE ALVITA AND HOW SHE DESCRIBES HERSELF

RYAN

Tho' she's a bit deaf herself In one ear...but otherwise in good health.

WINSTON

And skillful! Makes her own clothes, every stitch. That's not Armani – that's Alvita!

ASMA

Rich She is not. But she never passed a Big Issue vendor without chucking a quid Their way.

WINSTON

Cuss you if you don't.

ZAIRE

Fake gold chains Are her jewellery of choice. She drips like rain.

RYAN

Her underwear is dramatic – and red. Like the soles of her knock-off 'Choos.' It's said She looks bold. Her face shines like ebony.

ZAIRE

She's been that bitch since 1963.

RYAN

And yeah, she's been hitched five times to five men

WINSTON

(Without counting back-in-the-day bredrin)

ASMA

But we don't need to get into that now. She's a well-travelled woman. She allows Herself adventures. Self-care is her truth. She's been Ibiza, Corfu, Magalouf.

RYAN

She likes to wander. Hates to be tied down. With that gap-toothed smile she strides around town Dressed to impress.

WINSTON

Wears an isicholo: A big Zulu hat. She's not Zulu, no... But let woman have her hat! And a skirt That shows her shape.

DARREN

And some shoes that will hurt You if you're in her way.

ASMA

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.

DARREN

Sis been there, done that. This one knows it all, bruv.

ALVITA

And the thing is, I get my way every time . . . Women are good at lying! Or if you Want to say it more nicely, we just do A little creative work with the facts. I cry, I make up stuff, I blatantly act – I'm one of these Venus-born girls for real, But I've also got this Mars side? I feel Like Venus gave me my lust and passion, But Mars made me a woman of action. Basically I'm Venus with Mars rising, Which is why I don't get this 'slut-shaming'?



The Wife of Willesden and Chaucer's Wife of Bath

by Marion Turner, Professor of English Literature, Jesus College, University of Oxford

The Wife of Willesden is set in twenty-first century, multicultural north London. With its references to 'Time's up,' twerking, Jacob Rees-Mogg, and owning your privilege, it has a contemporary feel. But it is also closely based on a fourteenth-century poem, 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale,' part of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Zadie Smith even uses a poetic form – the iambic pentameter – invented by Chaucer, as she adapts and plays with his text.

Born in the early 1340s, Chaucer lived in the century of the Black Death, the Hundred Years' War, and the Great Revolt of 1381. A customs officer, diplomat, MP, and poet, he was himself a London boy, born and brought up on the banks of the Thames. There, he learnt multiple languages and was closely involved in the international trade that brought spices and fabrics all the way from Indonesia to London, and took English wool all over the known world. Medieval London was very different to modern London – but both are multilingual, cosmopolitan locales.

Chaucer's most famous poem - the Canterbury Tales - assembles a group of people in a London pub, on the south bank of the Thames. These people are going on a pilgrimage to Canterbury, and they decide to travel together, telling stories to pass the time. One of the great messages of the poem is that we should listen to diverse voices, not only the perspectives of those who are in power. Everyone has a story to tell.

Chaucer's most famous character was a woman named Alison, better known as the Wife of Bath (renamed by Smith as Alvita, the Wife of Willesden). Female characters in medieval literature were more usually princesses or virginal damsels; nuns or saints; witches or prostitutes. But the Wife of Bath was different – she was a middle-class, middle-aged, sexually active woman.

In her Prologue, she talks in great detail about her sexual history with her five husbands, and her experience of domestic violence and abuse. She also rails against the male-authored canon of literature, saying that if women had had the chance to write stories literary history would look very different. She then tells her tale – a story about rape, transformation, and redemption.

Alison of Bath immediately caused a stir. Chaucer himself treated her differently from his other characters, mentioning her in other Canterbury Tales, and in completely separate poems, as if she were a 'real' author. Across the centuries, she has fired the imaginations of hundreds of authors from around the world.

Those authors have often attempted to put Alison in her place. Alexander Pope, for instance, writing in the early eighteenth century, tried to make her a less shocking character: he completely cut out swathes of her Prologue, including a section about what genitals are for, Alison's declaration that she has the best quoniam (cunt), her comment that she has the mark of Mars in a private place, and her statement that she has sex evening and morning with her husbands.


More recently, Pier Paolo Pasolini, the Italian art-house director, depicted her as a monstrous and unappealing man-killer in his 1976 film about the Canterbury Tales. In his version, having sex with her is what kills her fourth husband, and her fifth husband cannot get an erection when faced with her terrifying sexuality.

“

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”

THE WIFE OF WILLESDEN



In the last twenty years there have been many more sympathetic portrayals of the Wife of Bath. Many new interpretations of the Wife of Bath, and of the Canterbury Tales as a whole, have come from postcolonial contexts. Black female poets from countries including the USA, Nigeria, and the UK, have taken the Canterbury Tales as a jumping off point for their own texts - Marilyn Nelson's *The Cachoeira Tales*, Karen King-Aribisala's *Kicking Tongues*, Jean Binta Breeze's *Wife of Bath in Brixton Market*, and Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* are all wonderful examples of this kind of creative response.

Zadie Smith's adaptation, *The Wife of Willesden*, is a far more complete and ambitious engagement with the *Wife of Bath* than most previous adaptations. One of the key messages of her version is that the histories that are relevant to people living in the UK are diverse. While Chaucer's '*Wife of Bath's Tale*' is set in the Arthurian past, the *Wife of Willesden's Tale* is set in eighteenth-century Jamaica. The people listening in the Colin Campbell pub are from 'church, temple, mosque, shul' - united by the fact that they are all 'local.' This community has a strong identity of its own, an identity marked by the 'North Weezy' accent, but it also embraces and celebrates many different origin points, religions, and ethnicities. Countries such as Jamaica, Nigeria, or Bangladesh are marked as part of British identity, as places whose histories have constructed modern Britain just as much as the imagined Arthurian past of Britain itself.

The messages about misogyny that are central to the *Wife of Bath* still resonate in Smith's play. In Chaucer's text, the *Wife of Bath's* husband obsessively reads from a book about hating women, a book called the 'book of wicked wives.' In *The Wife of Willesden*, the book has mutated into a collection of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century books (such as Jordan Peterson's *Twelve Rules for Life* and Neil Strauss's *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pick-Up Artists*). 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.

But there are other parts of the play that suggest positive change across time. In the '*Wife of Bath's Tale*,' the old, ugly woman ultimately transforms into a young, beautiful girl. Zadie Smith challenges conventional ideas about beauty, interrogating social prejudices about ageing women specifically – the prejudice that makes women vanish from our screens once they hit 40. When the lady transforms, she turns into Alvita herself, a woman in her 50s, the reincarnated Alison of Bath, described as an image of 'middle aged beauteousness.' Zadie Smith suggests that beauty need not be associated with youth, just as it need not be associated with whiteness. I think this is a move of which the *Wife of Bath* would have approved.

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ZADIE SMITH CHALLENGES CONVENTIONAL IDEAS ABOUT BEAUTY, INTERROGATING SOCIAL PREJUDICES ABOUT AGEING WOMEN SPECIFICALLY – THE PREJUDICE THAT MAKES WOMEN VANISH FROM OUR SCREENS ONCE THEY HIT 40.

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