**From Alison to Alvita:**

**Bad Feminism, Amateur Medievalism, and the Legacy of the Wife of Bath**

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


by

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**Abstract**

From her initial reception in the late 14th century to the Reddit threads of the 21st, the Wife of Bath has occupied a space of controversy for nearly the entirety of her literary existence. Sex-positive, verbose, and audaciously clever, yet simultaneously hedonistic and misanderous, her characterization sits on an uncomfortable border between proto-feminist representation and misogynous caricature. In response to the centuries-long debate surrounding her intended depiction, this project explores the textual foundations and literary legacy of the Wife as a figure that lies outside of a traditional feminist or antifeminist binary. Using Roxanne Gay's intersectional framework of "bad feminism," this thesis examines two intertwining versions of the Wife of Bath—the original character of "Alyson," from Geoffrey Chaucer's 14th-century collection, the *Canterbury Tales,* and a modern adaptation, "Alvita," from Zadie Smith's 2019 play *The Wife of Willesden.* Through a close reading of the Wife of Bath's Prologue and a selection of associated scholarship, this section explores the bad feminist roots of the original text and its contemporary reception, making a case for the figure's continued relevance to modern feminists and the methodological value of an amateur medievalist approach to understanding her character. Chapter two of the project goes on to consider the ways in which *The Wife of Willesden* develops Chaucer's characterization to speak directly and unambiguously to contemporary audiences. Finally, the project concludes by speculating on how the Wife's metatextual history in scholarly and popular spheres has contributed to her legacy in feminist spaces.

**Keywords:** the Wife of Bath; bad feminism; Zadie Smith; intersectionality; proto-feminism; amateur medievalism; anachronism

**Table of Contents**


| | |
|---|---|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 1: Alison of Bath: The Queen Bitch of Bad Feminism | 10 |
| Chapter 2: The Myth of the Everywoman: Bad Feminism in *The Wife of Willesden* | 24 |
| Conclusion | 36 |
| Works Cited | 44 |

**Short Titles**

*CT*: Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. 3rd ed. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2018.

*WoW*: Zadie, Smith. *The Wife of Willesden*. Zadie Smith, 2001.

*Turner*: Turner, Marion. *The Wife of Bath: A Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023.

**Figures**

*Figure 1:* Clare Perkins as Alvita in "*The Wife of Willesden"* 31

*Figure 2:* "Clare Perkins and Scott Miller, foreground, in Zadie Smith's
'The Wife of Willesden' at the Brooklyn Academy of Music," 35

*Figure 3:* Posters for the American and Italian releases of Pier Paolo Pasolini's
*Canterbury Tales* (1972) 42

**Introduction**

> Let us invent a new ceremony for this new occasion. What more fitting than to destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete? The word 'feminist' is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means 'one who champions the rights of women'. Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. And a word without a meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word. Let us therefore celebrate this occasion by cremating the corpse. Let us write that word in large black letters on a sheet of foolscap; then solemnly apply a match to the paper. Look, how it burns! What a light dances over the world!
>
> \- Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas,* 1938

In the 200-odd years since Seneca Falls, feminism has seemingly become so much more than a fight for gender equality. As Virginia Woolf implies in her tongue-in-cheek indictment from *Three Guineas*, the feminist label is no longer a straightforward social or political category advocating for women's rights; it hasn't been for a long time. Now the word insinuates a host of other rules, stereotypes, and associations: "True feminists" don't shave their armpits.[1] They don't use dating apps or participate in hook-up culture.[2] They keep their maiden names when they get married.[3] True feminists, which is to say fourth-wave feminists, participated in the Women's March, and the extra-good ones wore pink "pussyhats"—because everyone knows that what really defines the female experience is your internal organs. But hold on, scratch that, what I meant to say is that true feminists (which is to say fifth-wave feminists) support wearing makeup, but you should know that the sixth-wavers don't. And tenth-wave feminists…(wait, which wave are we on again?)... tenth-wave feminists are either lesbians or purely sexless,

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[1]Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, "The New Feminist Armpit Hair Revolution: Half-Statement, Half-Ornament," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/jun/24/feminist-armpit-hair-revolution-half-statement-half-ornament

[2] Conor M Kelly, "Sexism in Practice: Feminist Ethics Evaluating the Hookup Culture," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 2 (2012): 27–48, https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.28.2.27.

[3] Maddy Savage, "Why Do Women Still Change Their Names?," BBC, September 23, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200921-why-do-women-still-change-their-names.

though, to be honest, the only good ones are those dinosaurs from Jurassic Park who somehow found a way to be both.

This is, of course, a humorous simplification of the contemporary feminist landscape, and yet, its dizzying contradictions and rapid evolution from one favored ideology might not feel entirely unrealistic to many women (particularly those outside of traditional academic feminist spaces) trying to navigate their sociopolitical identity in a climate for which that identity often bears significant weight as a moral shorthand. As social media brings an unprecedented volume and diversity of voices to the feminist conversation, central questions of what it means to be feminist—what behavior we ascribe to that identity and who "deserves" to be labeled one or not—struggle to find cohesive answers. Feminism has always been complicated, and necessarily so. Female experiences are intricate and diverse, and simplified accounts of them will inevitably exclude essential dimensions of many women's intersectional female identities. However, as our everyday actions are increasingly placed on a public stage when immersed in this 21st-century identity discourse, it can feel impossible to be a "good feminist" and also a living, breathing woman. So screw it. Enter "bad feminism."

In response to the rigidity and prejudice of previous waves, bad feminism is a metaphorical "throwing up one's hands" at the flaws and limitations of historical feminism and the impossibility of satisfying an increasingly interconnected and ever-present jury of one's peers in the face of the ambiguous yet formidable threat of cancel culture. At the same time, however, it is not a rejection of the feminist label. As the creator of the term, Roxanne Gay writes in her collection of essays, *Bad Feminist*:

> I disavowed feminism in my late teens and my twenties because I worried that feminism wouldn't allow me to be the mess of a woman that I knew myself to be. But then I began to learn more about feminism. I learned to separate feminism from Feminism or Feminists or the idea of an Essential Feminism—one true feminism to dominate

> womankind…. Feminism's failings do not mean we should eschew feminism entirely.…We should disavow the failures of feminism without disavowing its many successes and how far we've come.[4]

She summarizes in the final line of her book, "I would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all."[5] Gay's "bad feminism" allows women to be contradictory, diverse, and multifaceted beings without sacrificing their right to demand equality and respect. It advocates for making informed choices that propel the movement forward while simultaneously acknowledging that these choices can be personally difficult and often provoke unwanted consequences. Most similarly to fourth-wave feminist considerations, Gay's conception also recognizes the essentialist and racist foundations of historical feminist waves as critical background for understanding why many women hesitate to identify with the feminist label and, in doing so, prioritizes a more inclusive movement going forward. As Gay explains in her TedTalk "*Confessions of a Bad Feminist*:"

> As a feminist, I feel a lot of pressure. We have this tendency to put visible feminists on a pedestal. We expect them to pose perfectly. When they disappoint us, we gleefully knock them from the very pedestal we put them on. Like I said, I am a mess — consider me knocked off that pedestal before you ever try to put me up there…. Bad feminism — or really, more inclusive feminism — is a starting point…. I am a bad feminist, I am a good woman, I am trying to become better in how I think, and what I say, and what I do, without abandoning everything that makes me human.[6]

There are two primary tenets of bad feminism that I highlight throughout this project: the first is its drive to reconcile women's personal flaws with their potential role or value as feminists; the second is its embrace of intersectional experiences as critical to female identity and, in turn, feminist activism. In centering the project around this framework, however, it is essential to note that Gay's collection of essays—equal parts confession and manifesto—never establishes a firm

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[4] Gay, Roxane. *Bad Feminist: Essays*. xii - xiii HarperCollins Publishers, 2014.
[5] Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays*. 318
[6] Gay, Roxane. "Roxane Gay: Confessions of a Bad Feminist | TED Talk." Accessed October 23, 2023. https://www.ted.com/talks/roxane_gay_confessions_of_a_bad_feminist.

philosophy for bad feminism. Her hesitance to do so, in many ways, reflects the feminist plurality (and, by extension, female plurality) that lies at the heart of the concept. With this understanding, I will nonetheless be using the term "bad feminism" throughout this piece as a way of representing Gay's conception of contemporary feminism, with particular emphasis on its narrative prioritization of the complexities of lived female experiences. After all, one way that we can view literary representations of women is as a select fictional collection of these lived experiences, and thus Gay's concept finds particular salience in this kind of analysis.

If proto-feminism is defined as the pre-20th century anticipation of a formal women's rights movement, then surely Geoffrey Chaucer's The Wife of Bath is the first recorded instance of a proto-bad feminist. Since her initial reception in the late fourteenth century, the character has occupied a space of ongoing literary controversy for her ambiguous portrayal at the intersection of women's liberation advocacy and anti-feminist stereotypes. She is violent, brash, and overtly misandrous, yet simultaneously witty, independent, and fiercely sex-positive. While the Wife's immediate concerns are, at times, outdated in their inherent connection to medieval society, her ideals and modes of communication have continuously found relevance in feminist conversations for over 700 years. Holistically, she presents a nebulous portrait of feminist realities, anti-feminist stereotypes, and broad human characterization that range in their social acceptability within feminist communities and society at large—but, then again, so do many women. Where these tensions present inherent complexities with every reading of the character, it is perhaps that very space of contradiction that has cemented the Wife as among the most adapted figures from Chaucer's literary canon.

This project will explore the "bad-feminist" potentiality of the Wife of Bath as revealed and highlighted through one such adaptation: Zadie Smith's 2019 play *The Wife of Willesden*. Smith's adaptation of the Wife is just one of many contemporary retellings to highlight a postmodern feminist interest in female plurality and intersectional identity. Though the original "Wife of Bath's Prologue" is often championed for its continuous modern relevance, adaptations of Alison's character necessarily expand upon their parent text in several critical areas. Foremost, the transhistorical approach that works like *The Wife of Willesden* offer often serves to illuminate the conceptual frameworks for social identity that have remained consistent, emerged, or disappeared in the seven centuries since Chaucer penned the *Canterbury Tales*. Studying the Wife's character through these new iterations gives readers the space to question or consider contemporary norms that may otherwise feel commonplace without a source of contrast. Secondly, while Chaucer's original text presents an essential anti-authoritarian and proto-feminist foundation for its adaptations, this foundation is undeniably limited in its application to a contemporary feminist audience by nature of its social context; Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife is fundamentally connected to the remote social and literary dynamics of the medieval period. Though this sense of remoteness adds value to contemporary readings of the text—many of the historical details of the Wife's vocational and regional background that Chaucer highlights are precisely what lends her character the specificity to resist anti-feminist generalizations about womanhood—it is worth noting that standards of feminism and female experiences have changed, and therefore evaluations of the Wife using modern terms can often benefit from the mediation of a contemporary author. As prescient as Chaucer's text may be, modern adaptations have an acute ability to place the work's original themes in their audiences' specific and concurrent social, political, or critical context. Finally, the remote nature of the

original text often also serves to exacerbate the effect of Chaucer's equivocal borrowing from medieval anti-feminist stereotypes; the ambiguity of the Wife's depiction is intensified by the reader's incomplete understanding of 14th-century social norms. Consequently, modern audiences are consistently asked to question whether aspects of the Wife that appear progressive would truly be received this way by the medieval public. Though the character's ambiguity has not prevented many modern feminist readers from relating to the Wife or understanding her in feminist terms, rewriting the character without the tension of a remote, equilateral feminist/antifeminist characterization removes another potential barrier to developing feminist readings of the text without erasing the character's legacy.

Using the backdrop of the Wife's metatextual literary history as a controversial feminist symbol, *The Wife of Willesden* embraces a bad feminist conception of womanhood by highlighting the aspects of the Wife's character from the original text that present her as a figure outside of her gendered representation and the subsequent dichotomy of a feminist-antifeminist binary. Smith's version of the Wife is not bound to the responsibility of representing a catalog of female experiences; as a result, she has the freedom to highlight identities and behaviors that extend beyond that realm of Capital-F Feminism (as Gay defines it), or even contradict it.[7] Smith's Wife can be a flawed feminist or a flawed woman and nonetheless maintain a sense of female empowerment and influence—a point that bears particular resonance when one considers the legacy of the Wife as a figure whose feminist status is persistently called into question.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will analyze the original "Wife of Bath's Prologue" through the lens of this "bad feminist" approach, with a dual emphasis on Chaucer's textual characterization of the Wife and the broad foundation that her rhetoric provides for an

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[7] Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays*. xiii.

intersectional, anti-authoritarian reading of the text in contemporary terms. To create a more encompassing image of the character as audiences might understand her today, I will also explore modern receptions of the Wife —in both scholarly and popular forums—as they contribute to her divisive feminist-anti-feminist legacy. In doing so, this chapter foregrounds the popular reception of the character among amateur medievalists to justify the Wife's continued relevance to contemporary feminists. Finally, I conclude Chapter One by briefly discussing scholar S. H. Rigby's comparisons between the Wife of Bath and proto-feminist poet Christine De Pisan to discuss how certain schools of existing scholarship on the Wife's feminism have historically impeded a bad feminist or pluralistic feminist reading of her character.

The second half of this piece goes on to explore how Smith's interpretation of the Wife in *The Wife of Willesden* expands upon the bad feminist roots of the original character to rewrite Alison in unambiguously intersectional terms as Alvita. Using a three-pronged analysis of the play, this chapter will examine the critical changes that Smith makes to Chaucer's text to analyze the question of what modern literary adaptations can offer to characters like the Wife that are often defined by their transcendent or universal qualities. The chapter begins by discussing the intersectional background of Smith's Wife, a Jamaican seamstress, in the context of a multi-cultural Britain, before exploring how the narrative structure of the piece—the division of the Wife's original prologue between multiple female figures in *The Wife of Willesden*—embodies Chaucerian scholar, Elizabeth Fowler's concept of social personhood to reflect a greater multiplicity of female experiences. Finally, the chapter will conclude by analyzing the relationship between the dramatic genre and the themes of the original text as they serve to realize Chaucer's interest in orality as a marginalized mode of communication.

Before I can embark on this analysis of the "bad feminist" Wife of Bath, I want to conclude by recognizing that, for many contemporary women, Gay's understanding of feminism potentially rings hollow. For many of those who have been deeply entrenched in discussions of "modern feminism" over the past few decades, the knee-jerk response to arbitrary binaries within the movement is a tired sigh and an eye-roll. Of course, you can be a feminist and still wear what you want, or screw who you want, or be called what surname you want when you want it. To a liberal, scholarly audience in a post-#metoo era, even conversations surrounding intersectional and inclusive social movements have the potential to feel rote and overplayed, or worse, a stale attempt at trendiness (and when have liberal scholars ever been wrong about social identity?) According to a 2020 poll by the Pew Research Center, only 19% of all women reported that the term "feminist" described them "very well," and only 61% identified with the category at all.[8] Forty percent of adults described feminism as "inclusive," 45% as "polarizing," and 30% as "outdated." A similar YouGov Survey cited by the BBC found that where roughly 80% of survey respondents supported equality between the sexes, only 30% considered themselves to be feminists.[9] Even my mom, a Magna Cum Laude graduate from The University of Michigan and The University of Chicago, the breadwinner of our household for 25 years, and the point guard of her high school basketball team (what's more feminist than women's basketball?), once confided over coffee that sometimes she wonders if she is a feminist. So clearly, somewhere among the estimated 4.6 million people who participated in the Women's March, feminism is losing people (yes, even liberal people). Maybe the controversy comes from questions like

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[8]Amanda Barroso, "61% of U.S. Women Say 'Feminist' Describes Them Well; Many See Feminism as Empowering, Polarizing," *Pew Research Center*, July 7, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/07/07/61-of-u-s-women-say-feminist-describes-them-well-many-see-feminism-as-empowering-polarizing/.

[9]Christina Scharff, "Why so Many Young Women Don't Call Themselves Feminist," *BBC*, February 6, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-47006912.

whether or not feminists should wear makeup or use Tinder (Glamour UK and Julie Bindel seem to think so). Maybe it comes from the crumbled feminist pedestal of famous figures and family members alike; the unattainable standards of the label that make it impossible or intimidating to try to live up to. Maybe it comes from a disappointing and harmful history of exclusion or maybe it comes from more complex questions; but regardless of the source of feminist divisions, cultural fatigue hasn't resolved them and thus scholarly analysis can't ignore them.

**Alison of Bath: The Queen Bitch of Bad Feminism**

> There are a few things in our culture that almost no one dislikes. Dolly Parton, fried rice. . . . I can think of something else, too. For this item the constituency is smaller—you probably have to go to college to want to vote on it—but really it, or she, should be included: the Wife of Bath, from Geoffrey Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales.
>
> - Joan Acocella for *The New Yorker,* "The Feminist Forerunner in Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales"[10]

Joan Acocella's snapshot introduction to the Wife of Bath presents an unconventional context for the character. Clothed in the uniquely modern (quasi-Americana) aura of Dolly Parton and fried rice, the Wife sits in a kind of hall of fame of beloved cultural icons that feels unlikely considering her remote roots. I have included Acocella's quote as the introduction to this project for a few reasons. The most immediate is that it serves as a tangible marker that 631 years after the *Canterbury Tales* collection was first circulated, the Wife of Bath remains a source of popular curiosity. In spite of her age, or perhaps because of it, Alison (the Wife's given name)[11] continues to occupy a celebrated and long-standing position within the cultural conversation — after all, how many fourteenth-century literary figures can boast a profile in the *New Yorker*?[12] Furthermore, despite Acocella's qualifications, her character is far from relegated to the classrooms of the college elite. While few outside the realm of undergraduate liberal arts may encounter her in Chaucer's original tongue—"*The Prologue of the Wyves Tale of Bathe"*

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[10] Joan Acocella, "A Biography of the Wife of Bath, Reviewed | The New Yorker," *The New Yorker*, February 6, 2023, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/02/13/the-feminist-forerunner-in-chaucers-canterbury-tales-marion-turner-wife-of-bath.Published in the print edition, February 13 & 20, 2023, with the headline 'The Marrying Kind.'

[11] Alternative spellings of the name include Allison, Alison, Alyson, and Alysoun.

[12] Though the article is technically a review of Marion Turner's 2023 biography of the character — aptly titled, *The Wife of Bath: A Biography* — it is the Wife herself who steals the show. Of the roughly 4,500 word review, 3,500 are strictly about the Wife, with no mention of the biography, not including those which summarize Turner's findings.

feels like a distant grandmother of the colloquially punchy "Wife of Bath's Tale"— she continues to exist in countless forms outside of the original text. Readers who have never even heard of the *Canterbury Tales* might experience her for the first time through Patience Agbabi's "The Wife of Bafa," Binta Breeze's "The Wife of Bath in Brixton Market," or Zadie Smith's *The Wife of Willesden*. More will find her on The Silver Screen as portrayed by Laura Betti[13] and Julie Walters,[14] and more still can catch glimpses (albeit distantly) through Molly Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Offered in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Even Acocella's article itself creates a potential introduction to the Wife through its affectionate summations of her character — "bossy, willful, sexy"[15] — and direct textual quotes. Thus, while the Wife of Bath may not be quite as popular as fried rice or Dolly Parton, she has certainly proven a similarly notable staying power.

The second reason I have for including Acocella's quote is a point of contention: to claim that "almost no one" dislikes the Wife of Bath is unfortunately to ignore a vast majority of her historical receipt. As Marion Turner describes, "From scribes who argued against her in the margins of 15th-century manuscripts to censors who burnt ballads about her in the 17th century, there are many examples of [the Wife] provoking anxiety in readers."[16] As I have noted in my introduction, among contemporary audiences, no aspect of the Wife is as anxiety-provoking as her status as a "feminist" foremother. A quick Google search brings up thousands of articles,

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[13] *The Canterbury Tales* (Produzioni Europee Associate, 1972). Note: In her 2023 article "How Chaucer's medieval Wife of Bath was tamed and then liberated in the 21st century," Chaucer biographer Marion Turner describes this adaptation as a "radically skewed interpretation."

[14] "The Wife of Bath," *Canterbury Tales* (BBC, September 18, 2003).

[15] Acocella, "A Biography of the Wife of Bath, Reviewed | The New Yorker."

[16] Marion Turner, "How Chaucer's Medieval Wife of Bath Was Tamed and Then Liberated in the 21st Century," University of Oxford English Faculty, January 12, 2023, https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/article/how-chaucers-medieval-wife-of-bath-was-tamed-and-then-liberated-in-the-21st-century.

scholarly and popular alike, and even a Reddit thread discussing “The Wife of Bath — proto-feminist icon or walking misogynist pastiche?”[17] It is not difficult to determine why Alison provokes such contention. She assaults her husband and burns his books, but only as a defense against his near-constant misogyny. She oggles the parish clerk at her fourth husband’s funeral and (almost within the same breath) marries him—yet she does so, not in a “gold-digging” attempt to secure his wealth and status, but rather at the risk of her own financial security. Her misappropriations of Biblical allegory can be read as a winking counter to the tactics of antifeminist literature, or as confirmation of the female literalism that those same texts champion. The list goes on.

Perhaps most egregiously, the Wife of Bath is not even a “real woman.” She is a woman written by a man; and thus, every quirk, joke, or twist of the truth can be used against her as evidence in the cultural dialogue of her male puppeteer and conceiver, pulling the strings in a comedic pantomime for an audience of his elite male peers. Yet, even with this understanding, her feminist potential is undeniable. As Turner summarizes:

> Alison of Bath is not a real woman, nor was she based on a real woman, or created by a woman. She is not even a fully rounded, psychologically complex character in the same way that, say, Dorothea Brooke or Clarissa Dalloway are. But neither is she an eternal type, the principle of the feminine, an everywoman, Eve. The Wife of Bath is, in some ways, a mosaic of many sources, all penned by men, most of them misogynist. Yet she does not come across as simply a jumble of the writings of Saint Paul, Jerome, Jean de Meun, and Walter Map.[18] No one before Chaucer had turned the antifeminists’ words against them as Alison does; no one had imagined a female character with this kind of wit, rhetorical technique, and personal experience going head to head with the most authoritative of authorities. Chaucer performed some kind of alchemy when he fused his

[17] “The Wife of Bath - Proto-Feminist Icon or Walking Misogynist Pastiche?,” Reddit, accessed April 5, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/TrueLit/comments/ese3y6/the_wife_of_bath_protofeminist_icon_or_walking/.

[18] The names Turner lists here are examples of notorious antifeminist authors, many of whom the Wife directly references in her prologue.

> cluster of well-worn sources with the contemporary details and a distinctive, personalized voice and produced something—someone—completely new.[19]

From a historical literary perspective, the Wife is an entirely novel creation. Her ambiguous portrayal in the context of the remote medieval period creates countless avenues for discussion, both in the project of understanding the proto-feminism of Chaucer's time and in our attempts to navigate our own.

Before I proceed with a close-reading analysis of the Wife, I want to clarify that the truth of the Wife of Bath, or rather the truth of Chaucer's intent for her, is not of interest to me in this thesis. Not only do I consider it impossible to know, but (as is the case with so many cultural debates) I find that seeking and defending a firm position within the binary is far less productive than examining the cultural context that surrounds it. It is also worth noting here that some scholarly interest in determining the effect of the Wife as a feminist or antifeminist character intersects with a broader cultural interest in defending the moral quality of Chaucer himself, particularly in the context of his infamous raptus charge.[20] I find this chain of reasoning to be flawed, and, therefore, it will not be relevant to this project. As the language of this piece serves to indicate, in my mind the Wife of Bath, by nature of her legacy, is as much her own "woman" as she is a product of Chaucer's writing. While her prologue, tale and accompanying lines create the foundations of her character and its possibilities—the details of which I will explore in the remainder of this section—her legacy has expanded far beyond their limits, and thus so has she.

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[19] Turner, *The Wife of Bath*. 2 – 3

[20] The scholarly understanding of Chaucer's raptus charge has shifted drastically over the past several decades. As a 2022 article from medievalist Kathryn Walton summarizes: "In 1380, Geoffrey Chaucer was involved in a lawsuit over the *raptus* of Cecily Chaumpaigne, the daughter of a prominent London baker. We know of the charge because of a document discovered by Frederick J. Furnivall in 1873, in which Chaumpaigne clears Chaucer of all charges related to her *raptus*. What exactly is meant by the word *raptus* has inspired a mountain of scholarly debate." Interpretations of the term *raptus* include the acts of abduction, rape, elopement, and violations of employment contracts. As of 2022, new evidence presented by Euan Roger has suggested (with wide consensus) that the initial 1873 legal document concerning the *raptus* Cecily Chaumpaigne's is referencing the latter of these definitions.

The concept of a bad feminist is, of course, not one that Chaucer would have been familiar with; however, his emphasis on the Wife's individualism and subversion of authority creates a strong foundation for modern adaptations to draw out these elements of her character in more explicit terms. As I note in my introduction, by advocating for a perception of feminists that centers their humanity and complexity, the term, "bad feminism" highlights two overlapping aims: the first being a call for greater sympathy towards flawed or otherwise complex behavior that might otherwise be undesirable in feminist figureheads; the second being a recognition of intersectional identities and their influence on female experiences, thus highlighting a need for greater diversity within the activist space as a whole. As a heterosexual, cisgender, White, merchant-class figure,[21] the Wife is most overtly directly connected to the first of these aims. However, 21st-century adaptations of her character, like Smith's, uncover the potential overlap between her rhetoric (in both its content and form) and those of other marginalized communities. In chapter two, I will explore Zadie Smith's foregrounding of this aspect of bad feminism in *The Wife of Willesden*. However, before doing so, I find it essential to explore the potential roots of this concept in the original text.

*Proto-Bad Feminism*

"Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, is right ynogh for me…" — from the first words that the Wife speaks aloud, we begin to see the foundations of her bad feminist adaptations.[22] On the most surface level, this couplet directly speaks to the themes of

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[21] It is worth noting here that this vocabulary is distinctly modern. From a historical perspective, because many of these labels were not available in the Wife's time, she cannot fully be identified with them. However, in analyzing her character from the perspective of a contemporary reader, I have included them, because they continue to shape modern readings of the text (much in the same way that the term "feminist" does).

[22] Chaucer, *CT*. 1 – 2.
For clarity, all citations from the *Canterbury Tales* within this project will cite the line numbers of the original verse, as opposed to the page numbers of printed text.

Gay's "bad feminism" as they might exist in Alison's character — a subversion of and resistance to written authority, a prioritization of personal experience and voice, a firm sense of individuality over social personhood. If we examine the structure of the couplets themselves, we can see similar themes repeating. The opening lines rhyme the words "auctoritee" and "me," as though Chaucer is balancing the Wife's experiential authority with the written textual authorities that she references in equal measure. Of these words, however, "me" is given the second line, and "auctoritee" represents a point of division in the sentence where the second line begins, thus implying the Wife's triumph over authority through her literal disruption of its written form while also giving her the "last word" in the couplet. The following line, "To speke of wo that is in mariage;" goes on to contextualize this broad anti-authoritarian stance to specify that the Wife believes herself the foremost authority on marriage specifically, which in turn seems to directly reference anti-feminist clerical authors as the primary example of the referenced "auctoritee" on the subject of matrimony (though her reference certainly applies to non-religious forms of written text, like the *Book of Wikked Wyves*).[23] If we follow this point, the Wife is situating herself as a source of knowledge above religious authorities, but more relevantly, indicates a broad willingness to counter or otherwise de-prioritize traditionally accepted or authoritative ideas of how women or people "should" behave in favor of her own ideas and experiences.

Beyond the overt meaning of Alison's words is the hidden effect of their syntax. As is common throughout her prologue, Alison interrupts herself almost immediately after launching into her first line. As a result, a sentence that presumably would have been "Experience is right ynogh for me…" becomes "Experience, though noon auctoritee/Were in this world, is right ynogh for me…" We see these interjections reappear frequently throughout her section of the

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[23] Chaucer, *CT*. 3.

text and even in other tales and prologues when she interrupts the other pilgrims. On a rhetorical level, they demonstrate several aspects of the Wife's character. The first is her recurring prioritization of the spoken word over written text. Supplementing the theme of the lines themselves, the fact that Chaucer's avatar includes these small personal remarks indicates a greater interest in representing the Wife as an oral storyteller, as opposed to neatly transcribing her ideas—though it is worth noting that this is complicated by the text's final form, which ignores the conceit of an oral narrative to utilize a written form (a highly intricate one at that.) These interjections also serve to emphasize the flexibility of oral storytelling with the Wife being able to respond to her audience and herself instantaneously in a manner that written texts cannot. The second, and most immediate, effect of the interjections is their illustration of her tone and voice. These small phrases like "Herkne eek," or "Lo, heere" bring to life her energy and enthusiasm as a storyteller in a manner that distinguishes her from the other pilgrims.[24] Through the structure of the *Canterbury Tales* alone, Chaucer is fundamentally interested in a wide range of perspectives. Each of the pilgrims represents a distinct social identity—"The Monk," "The Miller," "The Knight," etc.—and the characters engage in debates that seek to reflect the diversity of voices found in the totality of the public sphere. No single argument or perspective outweighs the others and no form of storytelling is portrayed as more or less acceptable or entertaining rhetorically (with the exception of Chaucer's meta-textual moments of self-deprecation). Using the lens of vocational identity as a category for organizing the pilgrims, we can view the Wife of Bath as a representative of either wives or women—the middle English word "wyfe" can translate to either meaning. In other words, much as the Monk or the Knight are primarily defined by their occupations, Alison's "career" can be seen as equivalent to her wifely or womanly experiences. From a purely structural perspective, this system of

[24] Chaucer, *CT*. 4, 35.

classification seems to only further support a binary approach to the Wife's character. After all, it is one thing to present a flawed female character on her own, but if this character holds the responsibility of representing all women-kind, the stakes change. However, if we compare Chaucer's characterization of the Wife to other characters within the collection, she stands out as a uniquely developed figure. Her prologue, for example, delivers an extensive catalog of her personal history and perspective, something that we do not receive from other pilgrims like the Knight. Indeed it is also the longest and most developed prologue in the collection— a whopping 856 lines, compared to the 77 of "the Miller's Prologue."[25] Alison is also one of the few characters for whom we receive a proper first name, perhaps the most overt marker of one's individuality and identity.[26] The Wife is more than just a social representation of a "career" wife or woman; she is her own person, and Chaucer seems to emphasize this point to the same degree that a bad feminist reading might.

*"You Amateurs!": The Value of Non-Academic Medievalism*

As intricate as Chaucer's textual depiction of the Wife of Bath is, our interpretation of her character is as much influenced by audiences' understandings of feminism as it is by the words of the Prologue itself. As medievalist S. H. Rigby notes in his essay "The Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan, and the Medieval Case for Women," evaluations of the Wife's feminism typically fall into two distinct approaches: those that seek to "modernize" her by analyzing how her character finds relevance among contemporary readers and those who take a "historicizing" mode of interpretation in an attempt to "recover the original meaning of a work."[27] Rigby argues that

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[25] Chaucer, *CT*.

[26] Other named characters include the Host, Harry Bailey; the Prioress, Madame Eglantine; the Friar, Huberd; the Cook, Roger; the Miller, Robyn; and the Reeve, Osewald.

[27] S. H. Rigby, "The Wife of Bath, Christine De Pizan, and The Medieval Case for Women.," *The Chaucer Review* 35, no. 2 (2000): 133.

attempting to engage in both strategies at the same time is impossible to achieve because the standards of feminism have changed so drastically since the period in which Chaucer wrote:

> The problem in the case of the Wife of Bath is that our sympathy with her views today can often lead us to neglect the gap which exists between her behavior and that prescribed for the estate of women by medieval moralists. We thus read the Wife's defense of women literally rather than ironically, seeing her as a witty debunker of clerical misogyny rather than as a debunker who is herself being wittily debunked. Yet, in fact, the self-justification offered by the Wife in her Prologue can be understood in just the same way, generically and contextually, that we read the spurious self-justifications of the Monk and the Friar. It too can be seen as an example of Chaucer's use of antiphrasis by which the text actually means the opposite of what it explicitly seems to say. Of course, by modern standards it will seem circular to judge characters such as the Monk or the Wife in terms of the values which they themselves have already rejected.[28]

Rigby seems to ask: what is the purpose of discussing whether the Wife is feminist or anti-feminist in a contemporary context if our metric for those terms has changed so significantly? Why not pick another figure to explore those issues, one that isn't 600 years old? Though Rigby only explicitly disavows using multiple, conflicting approaches for evaluating the Wife's feminism, his point nonetheless seeks to invalidate any modern effort to connect to or interpret her feminism status as futile or anachronistic. By his logic, we cannot, and should not, attempt to relate to the Wife as contemporary feminists because she exists in a fundamentally historical context.

Though I agree with Rigby's stance regarding the futility of evaluating the effect or intended depiction of the Wife using modern social metrics, his argument fails to consider the legacy of the Wife's reception. When Rigby writes "our sympathy with her views today can often lead us to neglect the gap which exists between her behavior and that prescribed for the estate of women by medieval moralists," one gets the sense that the mistaken, naive "our" in his

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[28]Rigby, "The Wife of Bath, Christine De Pizan, and The Medieval Case for Women." 154.

scenario refers to an imagined base of popular, non-scholarly readers. This tone fails to acknowledge the value that these amateur readers contribute to cultural understandings of the Wife, but it entirely ignores that the purpose of determining her feminist status is not solely a historical effort— evaluating her in contemporary terms may not provide insight into the feminism of the fourteenth century, but it does allow us to identify own contemporary cultural and personal criteria for feminism. I will return to this concept in section two to discuss the ways in which adaptations like Smith's highlight the value of these anachronistic approaches to understanding the character.

In spite of Rigby's urgings, readers of the *Canterbury Tales* have been using their personal experiences to connect with the Wife's character for centuries, and as our criteria for and understanding of feminism continue to redefine themselves in complex and conflicted ways, the desire to draw comparisons with an external representation of feminism will only persist. Dismissing the debate surrounding the Wife's modern feminist status simply because it does not align with scholarly aims ignores the vast majority of audiences. The *Canterbury Tales* is a fundamentally democratic text: it was written in Middle English for the explicit purpose of remaining accessible to the broader public using collective folk tales that they were familiar with. So if the collection was never intended to be discussed in exclusively scholarly terms, why should we seek to invalidate an amateur readership now? The cultural dialogue surrounding the *Canterbury Tales* has consistently developed in complexity since the piece was first printed. In response, the conversation surrounding Alison's feminism can no longer solely consider the original text or time period. As of the 21st century, our discussions of the Wife are also in dialogue with adaptations, scholarship, and nearly a century of public debate; consequently, modern evaluations of the Wife will always continue to exist both inside and outside of scholarly

discourse. As a result, we can interpret these cultural conversations surrounding her character as being more concerned with examining contemporary perspectives on feminism than they are with evaluating the feminism of Chaucer's time.

*The Ghosts of Feminists Past*

Rigby's discussion of the Wife of Bath reflects another trend in existing scholarship on the character: the tendency to present a narrative of historical feminist experiences that is defined by one version or conception of what feminism is. Having established his argument invalidating modern evaluations of the Wife, Rigby goes on to raise his own historical position on her feminist status — namely that she has no feminist standing. Presenting the writings of proto-feminist poet Christine de Pizan as evidence, he argues that the Wife's behavior explicitly contradicts that of the accepted feminist arguments of the medieval period:

> We tend to remember the Wife and to sympathize with her because of her defense of women against misogynist clerks, yet, as we shall see, the Wife's behavior and opinions would not, for Christine, have made Alisoun into a champion of her sex. In other words, the Wife does not just fail to live up to the standards imposed by male authority, she is profoundly problematic when judged against the moral standards of the most forthright and systematic feminist thinker of the day.[29]

My objective in this project is not to evaluate the Wife in the context of her socio-historical period, but, Rigby's arguments nonetheless affect my reading of her in the present day. By dismantling the foundation of her modern literary position, which is to say the feminist potential of the original text, Rigby presents himself in opposition to both historical and contemporary readings of the Wife as any form of feminist. This effect is particularly heightened by his invocation of these contemporary readings in the introduction. Rigby is not only arguing that the Wife should not be evaluated as a historical feminist simply because she meets some of our

[29] Rigby, "The Wife of Bath, Christine De Pizan, and The Medieval Case for Women." 139.

criteria for modern feminism; he is arguing that she never should have entered a feminist conversation in the first place.

Rigby's arguments in this article are flawed for a few reasons, one of which I have already addressed, but the most glaring error in his reading of the Wife's historical feminism is the metric by which he defines her actions—the writings of Christine De Pisan. Christine De Pisan is retrospectively known as one of the first feminists, but her writings are not defined by that singular interest. As a highly devout Italian woman of the noble class, her definition of feminism was fundamentally concerned with women's moral behavior as defined by the Christian religion. The pinnacle of female virtue, in her eyes, was the female saints and martyrs of the Bible, and those who failed to live up to these standards, regardless of their social class or situation, were a disgrace to their sex. The most notable text of Christine's career, indeed the text that Rigby cites most often, is *The Boke Of The Cyte Of Ladyes*. In Part I of the text, Christine addresses Matheolus's *Lamentations*, a popular anti-feminist text not dissimilar to Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves, which the Wife addresses. In response to a quote from *Lamentations*, Christine writes:

> There came before me ryght grete foyson of dyttyes & prouerbes of many dyuers auctours to ye purpose yt I remembred in myselfe one after another as it were a welle spryngynge. And in conclusyon of all I determyned y god made a foule thynge when he fourmed woman in meruayllynge howe soo worshypfull a werke man deyned euer to make one soo abhomynable werke whiche is the vessell as by sayenge of the and y draught & herbegage of al euyll & of all vyces. Then I beynge in this thought there sprange in me a grete dyspleasannce and sorowe of courage in dyspraysynge myselfe and all womenkynde so as yf y sholde be shewed in nature and I sayd suche wordes in my'complayntes.[30]

In encountering such broadly defamatory depictions of women, she describes experiencing a strong feeling of sadness and self-disgust before the three personified female Virtues appear to

[30] Christine De Pisan, *The Boke Of The Cyte Of Ladyes* (Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership, 1405), http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A20897.0001.001.

her and assure her that Matheolus's claims are baseless. The moment is powerful and heartbreaking; however, it is not the only correct response to the misogyny of this, or any, time. In comparing Christine's response to the Wife's, we can map two entirely distinct forms of feminist action. As Alison listens to Jankyn read from his Book of Wicked Wives for the umpteenth time in their marriage, she snaps:

Who wolde wene, or who wolde suppose,
The wo that in myn herte was, and pyne?
And whan I saugh he wolde nevere fyne
To reden on this cursed book al nyght,
Al sodeynly thre leves have I plyght
Out of his book, right as he radde, and eke
I with my fest so took hym on the cheke
That in oure fyr he fil bakward adoun.[31]

She describes feeling the same sense of pain as Christine in her reaction to his rhetoric, but where Christine's response is an articulate argument for women's moral behavior and a warning to protect their name from misogynist slanderers, Alison's is, quite literally, a punch in the face. If we map these distinctions onto modern categories, readers might see Christine as a "good feminist"— narrow in her definition of "good women " and principally concerned with morality and outward presentation — and Alison as a bad one. While Rigby is not wrong in saying that Christine would have disapproved of the Wife, he is flawed in upholding the *Book of the City of Ladies* as a definitive standard of feminist thinking at the time. Where Christine certainly represents one form of proto-feminist thinking — a prominent and vocal one as a result of her social standing — to position her as representative of all medieval women's perspectives on their social identity overtly erases the potentiality of other, likely less privileged and thus less documented, perspectives. If we assume that scholarly perspectives like Rigby's influence and overlap with popular dialogue — and I think that assumption is fair, considering that Rigby's

[31] Chaucer, *CT*. 788 – 793.

article specifically can be found both in the pre-eminent journal for Chaucerian studies, the *Chaucer Review*, and in the comments of the aforementioned Reddit thread — the relevance of defending the plurality of feminist perspectives through the Wife's character becomes clear. In historical and contemporary forums alike, formalized understandings of feminism and female experiences face a distinct social and scholarly pressure to present a standardized, unified, and simplified account of our societal reality. Yet, as the exclusionary history of the feminist movement teaches us, succumbing to this pressure by embracing a singular conception of feminism only serves to create a false understanding of our social environment and the communities that live within it. By analyzing figures like the Wife of Bath, who reflect the uncomfortable complexities of feminism, with a lens that accepts and encourages those complexities, modern audiences can perhaps come a bit closer to glimpsing the reality of multidimensional female and feminist experiences in their true form.

**Alison's Daughter: Updating the "Everywoman"**

> From the moment Alyson opens her mouth…I knew that she was speaking to me, and that she was a Kilburn girl at heart…. For Alyson's voice — brash, honest, cheeky, salacious, outrageous, unapologetic — is one I've heard and loved all my life….The words may be different, but the spirit is the same.
>
> - Zadie Smith, "Introduction: From Chaucerian to North Weezian (via Twitter)," *The Wife of Willesden*

Zadie Smith's understanding of the Wife of Bath is radically intimate. Her portrait in this excerpt, down to the persistent use of Alyson's first name, treats the character with a sense of familiarity akin to an elementary school best friend — a fellow "Kilburn girl," as she puts it. At its core, Smith's depiction, like so many other modern conversations about the Wife, serves as an insistence on the character's continual relevance to female experiences. However, unlike the traditional scholarly defense, Smith's depiction of Alison in this quote does not rely on the details of her politics in their medieval context or on one-to-one comparisons between her prologue and the feminist rhetoric of the modern day; rather, it captures the essence of what many (particularly female-identifying) readers experience in their first encounter with the Wife: an unexpectedly personal connection. It is the sense of resonance that readers like S.H. Rigby miss in their analyses of the Wife's feminist potentiality.

While there is a certain logic to Rigby's claim that remote (proto) feminist figures cannot simultaneously serve as contemporary ones, his theory does not account for the response that many amateur or cultural medievalists like Smith (and myself) experience when reading the Wife: that Alison's voice is remarkably similar to the feminist figures in our personal lives. Indeed, Smith's interpretation of the character is most successful — both in this excerpt and *The Wife of Willesden*— in her ability to translate this personal connection to a wider audience. It is

one thing to read the *Canterbury Tales* and acknowledge the Wife's contemporary similarities but to imagine her laughing up and down the streets of Kilburn as somebody's neighbor (or many somebodies' wife) has another, entirely more visceral effect. Rigby's understanding of the Wife in strictly linear temporal terms falsely invalidates this form of understanding, which, in turn, reinforces the value of an anachronistic approach like Smith's.

*Defining "the Now:" The Transhistoricism of Non-Academic Medievalism*

In her 2012 book, *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, Carolyn Dinshaw offers a more theoretically framed perspective on the value of amateur medievalism. Drawing from the popular Smiths song of the same name, "How Soon is Now?" explores the concept of temporality in the medievalist field:

> The problem with "now" is that it's. . . now. Or it's now. Or it's right now. The denoted moment shifts, it slips, it is deferred, potentially infinitely, along an endless timeline of moments. The word soon only makes things worse, shifty and resistant as it is to fix a definite time.[32]

The "now" of Chaucer and the Wife of Bath's period is entirely separate from the "now" of Zadie Smith's, which makes it difficult to place the two authors in conversation with one another (such is Rigby's perspective). However, as Dinshaw argues, this embrace of anachronism offers a non-linear understanding of history that provides its own value, one that is particularly relevant to Smith's adaptation. She writes:

> My broadest goal in this book is not only to explore but also to claim the possibility of a fuller, denser, more crowded now that all sorts of theorists tell us is extant but that often eludes our temporal grasp. This means fostering temporalities other than the narrowly sequential. This means taking seriously lives lived in other kinds of time…Amateurs—these fans and lovers laboring in the off-hours—take their own sweet

[32] "Introduction: How Soon Is Now?," in *How Soon Is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time*, by Carolyn Dinshaw (Duke University Press, 2012), 2, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395911.

> time, and operating outside of regimes of detachment governed by uniform, measured temporality.[33]

Dinshaw's theory validates projects like Smith's that seek to supersede the baggage of the Wife's historical context, as well as her scholarly and historical reputation, to reimagine her in her audience's own version of "now."

This project of visualizing a modern Alison sits at the crux of Smith's adaptation in *The Wife of Willesden;* however, even among those who participate in a more anachronistic understanding of the character, Smith's play remains controversial. Alexis Soloski writes in a *New York Times* review of the production:

> Earthy, contradictory, impulsive and self-aware, [Chaucer's Wife of Bath] seems effortlessly and shockingly modern….What does it mean to offer her a modern vernacular and wardrobe? Extrapolating from "The Wife of Willesden," not that much….The Wife of Bath is an everywoman, but she's also a singular literary creation, a character who transcends her moment. She doesn't really need the updates — or…knockoff Jimmy Choos — to speak to ours.[34]

Juxtaposing Soloski's excerpt against Smith's in the epigraph, the two evidently share a mutual understanding of Alison as a strikingly modern figure. Smith marvels at her similarities to the multicultural women of her hometown; Soloski directly describes her qualities of "transcendence" and "everywoman-hood." However, where the authors maintain an insistence and appreciation of the Wife's modernity, they diverge in their understandings of what to do with this quality. As Soloski seems to ask, if the Wife remains valuable to modern readers because of her timeless relevance to their experiences, what is the value or purpose of transposing her to a modern context? She was already modern.

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[33] "Introduction: How Soon Is Now?" 4 – 5.

[34] Alexis Soloski, "Review: In 'The Wife of Willesden,' a Literary Marriage Falters," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2023, sec. Theater, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/06/theater/the-wife-of-willesden-review-zadie-smith.html.

Before I answer Soloski's question, it is important to note that Smith's adaptation is far from the first of its kind. As I outline in my introduction, the Wife has been rewritten countless times over the past several centuries, and while many of these new works seek to maintain the character's original historical context, many more do not. *The Wife of Willesden* specifically participates in a recent trend among multicultural English poets to adapt Alison as a vehicle for challenging a conventional understanding of British cannon, history, and culture.[35] Aside from Smith's, the most prominent poetic works within this movement include Patience Agbabi's "The Wife of Bafa" and Binta Breeze's "The Wife of Bath in Brixton Market," both of which provide equally compelling and complex grounds to answer the question of updating Alison.[36] Of the three, I have selected Smith's adaptation as the focus of this project for a few reasons. Smith is among the most popular of these writers outside of Chaucerian communities. As such, her play has not only attracted a broader range of critical work, but it also has a greater potential to reach external audiences who are not already familiar with the Wife.

Smith's adaptation also has a perceived fidelity to the original source material that has proven particularly effective in provoking lines of scrutiny like Soloski's. As Smith herself describes, "Despite the fact that Alyson has turned into Alvita…the text is, for the most part, a direct transposition of the Wife of Bath's prologue and tale," (Smith 17). While I agree with Smith's claim to an extent — hers is the only adaptation of the three to utilize a long-form

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[35] As Marion Turner writes: "[Smith, Agbabi, and Breeze] are not all doing the same thing [in their adaptations] but they clearly share some concerns and interests…. In asserting the multicultural nature of England, and specifically London, and in foregrounding the dynamic immediacy of contemporary dialects, Agbabi, Breeze, and Smith are therefore drawing out aspects of Chaucer's own world, while also focusing on ways that his poetry can speak to and of new communities in our own time and place" (233, 235).

[36] Other works within this trend include Marilyn Nelson, *The Cachoaeria Tales and Other Poems* (2005); Karen King-Aribisala, *Kicking Tongues* (1998); and Gloria Naylor, *Bailey's Cafe* (1992); *Refugee Tales I-IV* (2016, 2017, 2019, 2021 [a collection of tales in dialogue with the Canterbury Tales that seek to depict and advocate for the experiences and rights of refugees] edited by David Herd & Anna Pincus)

structure akin to Chaucer's, and as such, some of her lines can feel like direct transpositions: "Experience, though noon auctoritee" (WoB Prologue 1), for example, becomes "I do not need any permission or college degrees" (Smith 15). However, Smith also makes critical changes to the structure, form, and even content of the Wife's original prologue and tale that serve to further develop her potential as a contemporary "bad feminist" figure.

*Content: Multicultural Wives of Bath*

Soloski's discussion of the Wife of Bath as both a singular literary creation and as an "everywoman" creates the implication that, regardless of their background, any woman should be able to see themselves within the experiences of the Wife. This argument is flawed in a number of ways. Among the most overt is that the *Canterbury Tales* is not, by any stretch of the word, an accessible text. Even translated versions of the tales contain symbolism and cultural context that is difficult to grasp without extensive background in the area. Adaptations like Smith's, even if they were verbatim modern transpositions of the Wife's prologue and tale, are valuable because they remove those barriers to entry and expand the potential audience of the original tale. But *The Wife of Willesden* is not just a modern translation— in comparing Smith's version of the Wife to Chaucer's, what stands out about the character is not the unifying thread of "the everywoman" or the sly references to the General Prologue, but rather the social identities that complicate their experiences of womanhood. To say that anyone can relate to Alison—who is, among other things, an emblem of the classic English literary canon and the values it represents—reflects a certain privileged perspective.[37] The culture of canonized media has never

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[37] In response to this claim, Chaucerian scholars might point out that the history of Chaucer as a canonized figure is somewhat more complicated than that of other historical English literary figures like Shakespeare. As Turner writes, "The idea that [Chaucer represents conservative authority and a monocultural England is profoundly misleading….Chaucer's world was not a monocultural, exclusively white, world: it was an environment that was itself varied and deeply connected to other parts of the global system," (233, 235). However, regardless of the

encouraged marginalized communities to view themselves in traditionally normative roles—particularly racially or ethnically normative ones. Smith's Wife, Alvita, is a Jamaican immigrant living in Brent; the textual changes that reflect that background are not merely for aesthetics—they aren't the same as changing red stockings to red-soled Jimmy Choos—they change the way that we might view the character as a reflection of contemporary feminism and our relationships to it.

*Structure: Alison Divided*

One of the difficulties of viewing the Wife as a modern "bad feminist" is the structure of the *Canterbury Tales* as a series of perspectives divided among social representatives. By defining the pilgrims through these labels, Chaucer signals to the reader—whether intentionally or not—that the characters' psychologies within the collection are in some capacity a commentary on the social entities that they represent. This, in turn, generates an anticipation for caricatured or otherwise flattened forms of representation that become particularly problematic when womanhood is one of these categories. As I've noted in the previous section, the details of Alison's verse subvert the reader's expectations both by directly countering the antifeminist narratives of universal womanhood presented in literature like Jenkyn's *Book of Wikked Wyves* and by developing Alison's psychological and rhetorical complexity far beyond that of the other pilgrims. However, at the same time, the broad facts of her character are 1) that she falls into many of the anti-feminist stereotypes that we find in misogynous literature of the medieval period—like many Wikked Wyves, the Wife is talkative, sexually forward, often presents a literalist interpretation of authority (even if for only her own means)— and 2) that she serves, if only in title, as a representative of womankind. So while the details of the Wife in textual form

historical specifics, Chaucer nonetheless bears a certain image among contemporary readership that reflects a history of exclusionary cultural standards.

speak to a highly developed and individualized character, Chaucer's use of social labeling and (at best) ambivalent borrowing from an antifeminist tradition complicates her legacy significantly—hence the (in)famous feminist or anti-feminist debate.

Smith's iteration of the Wife, Alvita, is no less provocative in her characterization. As the character of "the Author"—a stand-in for Chaucer's own authorial avatar in the original text—advises the audience:

> 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.[38]

Wrapped head to toe in scarlet, from the trim of her fur coat to the heels of her Jimmy Choos, Alvita brings her stocking-clad Medieval counterpart firmly into the 21st century (Figure 1). She is just as brazen, boisterous, and twice as sexually forward, yet there is no mistaking her for a misogynous straw woman. Why not? One shift lies in Smith's use of social context. The structure of Chaucer's project as tales divided by the social identity of their tellers places the Wife in a context that encourages the reader to define her by a similar social category of womanhood. By creating her own rich community solely within the world of the Wife's original prologue and tale, Smith encourages the same themes of social plurality without reducing the dimensions of the characters.

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[38] Smith, *WoW*. 12.

Figure 1: Clare Perkins as Alvita in "*The Wife of Willesden"*[39]

Another critical change in Smith's adaptation is her use of voicing. In the Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale, Alison is the only speaker. She is the sole representative of her kind. In Smith's, however, Alison's monologue is split between several different women: the Author, "A brown woman in a headwrap," Publican Polly, "the woman who runs the Colin Campbell pub," Auntie P, "Alvita's churchgoing aunt," Kelly "Alvita's very shy niece," Zaire "Alvita's best friend," Sophie, Asma, Eriphyle, and the Old Wife.[40] Even from the character descriptions in the dramatis personae section of the text, the reader can tell that each woman has her own voice and background. Some of them support Alvita's perspectives, others do not. So while Alvita remains

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[39] Brenner, Marc. *Rattling along: the cast of "The Wife of Willesden."* 2021. Photograph. https://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/wife-willesden-kiln-theatre-review-saucy-ode-brent

[40] Smith, *WoW*. xix, xx

the feminist focal point of the play, there is no mistaking her for a symbol of homogenized womanhood.

We can see Smith's interpretation of Alison as an extension of Chaucer's own stylistic interest in the characterization of the Wife's (and other pilgrims') multifaceted social identities. In her 2003 book, *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing*, Elizabeth Fowler adds a new dimension to this understanding of Chaucer's use of social plurality through her concept of "social personhood." She defines "social persons" as "models of the person, familiar concepts of social being that attain currency through common use. The viewer and reader rely on them as ways of understanding figural representation, whereas the artist relies on them as compositional tools or guides…. Social persons are sets of expectations built in the reader's mind by experience, and they are notions of what it is to be a person."[41] She uses the example of the Knight, one of the more strictly archetypal pilgrims in the collection, to illustrate this concept. She notes that Chaucer's introduction of the Knight in the General Prologue signals images of multiple images of social identity. When Chaucer writes:

> A knyght ther was, and that a worthy man,
> That fro the tyme that he first bigan
> To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
> Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie,[42]

and later:

> In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
> Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye.
> At Lyeys was he and at Satalye,
> Whan they were wonne, and in the Grete See
> At many a noble armee hadde he be,[43]

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[41] Elizabeth Fowler, "Introduction: Arguments of a Person," in *Literary Character: The Human Figure in Early English Writing* (Cornell University Press, 2003), https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.7591/9781501724169.

[42] Chaucer, *CT*. 43 – 46.

[43] Chaucer, *CT*. 56 – 60.

he paints two distinct archetypes of literary and social Knighthood within the same character:

> The figure riding a horse invokes a number of social persons as it moves through the portrait: one is the crusader, a mainstay of, for example, chronicle, sermon, and manuscript illumination. The stark global landscape divided into "cristendom" and "hethenesse" suggests the early English romance and its fabulously belligerent protagonist, the romance knight; the catalog of heathen places that follows, as Jill Mann has shown, is a feature of the chanson de geste and puts us in mind of its somewhat different hero-knight, the knight of the chanson de geste. Two social persons here, then, are drawn from literary tradition and conjured by landscape.[44]

Using multiple "genres" of a recognizable social form within the same figure therefore brings complexity to the reader's understanding of the Knight's character, even though he is defined by a singular social label. We can see Smith engaging with Fowler's model of social personhood in *The Wife of Willesden*, albeit in a distinct and abstract form. As a genre comedy, it is not particularly interested in presenting psychological realism for its characters. On their own, each of the female figures in the play might be read as somewhat flattened or caricatured: Auntie P., "Alvita's church-going aunt" is often relegated to speeches that concern religion in a comically conservative tone:

> How come you believe you can get wedded
> Five times? Lawd knows how many times bedded![45]

By dividing the original Wife's rhetoric among these diverse, if somewhat simplified female characters, Smith presents her own model of social personhood. Dividing the original monologue among these characters similarly signals a diversity of female social experiences and a greater complexity within the Wife's character. Furthermore, Smith's adaptation engages with the racial, cultural, and sexual identities of the characters to present a version of social personhood that embraces an intersectional framework.

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[44] Fowler, "Introduction: Arguments of a Person." 6.

[45] Smith, *WoW*. 16.

*Form: Alison Out Loud*

The final critical difference between the *Canterbury Tales* and *The Wife of Willesden* lies in their respective genres. The *Canterbury Tales* operates under the narrative conceit of an oral storytelling competition. As we can see through the Wife's rhetorical style in her prologue and tale, Chaucer often seems to highlight the social power of this mode of communication — its flexibility and egalitarianism — and in doing so, prioritizes a form of sharing information that is traditionally associated with marginalized communities over a traditional written form of authority. This claim, however, is undercut by the fact that the *Canterbury Tales* is nonetheless a written text, thus returning to that traditional form as the primary mode. Like so much of *the Wife of Willesden*, Smith's transposition of the original text helps to undercut this ambiguity and contradiction by converting the medium to a true oral performance. The nature of the performance medium inherently highlights the multiplicity of the original character— each night is a new performance, with a new audience and, eventually, a new "Wife" in the form of the actress playing her. In seeing a physical performer embody the role of Alvita, the audience is also better able to see her as a singular character, as opposed to a representation of a social category. Smith's decision to stage her play at the Kiln Theatre, directly across from the real Colin Campbell pub where the story takes place further underscores this interest in realism. As brilliant and nuanced as Fowler's analysis of Chaucer may be, non-scholarly contemporary audiences are unlikely to pick up on the medieval literary tropes and symbols that indicate a sense of complexity within the pilgrims, specifically the Wife; however, the viewers are more likely to be able to recognize these symbols when they are drawn from their concurrent social context. The appearance and physical presence of the characters alone present one form of this — Publican Polly's exhausted mannerisms and leopard-print clothing hint at a background that is entirely

separate from that signaled by Alvita or Zaire (Figure 2). The implicit presence of Brent further develops this sense of cultural depth and intersectionality for the figures in the community, driving home the continued relevance of Chaucer's social themes to a contemporary audience, while also drawing out the emotional qualities of the text that might otherwise remain buried without the mediation of authors like Smith. When they eventually leave the play, the audience is encouraged to find glimpses of the Wife and her community of fellow characters as they step into the real world, to view her, much as Smith does, as a "Kilburn girl at heart."

Figure 2: "Clare Perkins and Scott Miller, foreground, in Zadie Smith's 'The Wife of Willesden' at the Brooklyn Academy of Music," (Soloski).[46]

[46] Stephanie, Berger, Photograph. 2023.
https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/06/theater/the-wife-of-willesden-review-zadie-smith.html

**Conclusion**

"Not bigonne [bygone], just bygone [begun]."
- Caroline Bergvall, *Alisoun Sings*

Caroline Bergvall's 2019 verse, *Alisoun Sings*, is a complicated addition to the adapted canon of the Wife of Bath. Jam-packed with fourth-wall breaks, invented language, and layered cultural references (14th and 21st century alike), it is far too complicated, in fact, to unpack in its entirety within the remaining scope of this project. In thinking about a conclusion, however, I found myself particularly drawn to the aforementioned excerpt for its poetic encapsulation of the, almost paradoxical, act of finding a conclusion for a figure like Alison. In many ways, Alison *is* bygone; she's ancient. Her textual self has remained without update for centuries. And yet, as Marion Turner writes in her final sentence of *The Wife of Bath: A Biography*, even in 2024, her cultural presence continues to reach new crescendos: "Alison's footsteps are, if anything, beating louder in the twenty-first century than ever before."[47] Bergvall's quote juxtaposes these two states of literary existence — the bygone and the newly beginning — while, at the same time, presenting them as overlapping conditions. Her pseudo-Middle English word "bigonne" could just as easily be read as "begun," and "bygonne" as "bygone." Indeed, the etymology of these constructed words seems to encourage this reading: both prefixes, "bi" and "by," are iterations of the root "be," most closely associated with beginnings, and "bygonne," in this context, serves as a false cognate of the contemporary English word. By creating a sense of ambiguity within the phrase, Bergvall takes a similarly anachronistic approach to the Wife as other adaptors like Smith. She seems to argue in favor of a non-linear approach to temporality, one that embraces anachronism and allows for the ongoing relevance of seemingly "bygone" figures. Within the

[47] Turner, *The Wife of Bath*. 246.

same breath, she also presents a firm stance on the constructed meaning of language — who determines which interpretation is correct? — a question that finds particular salience alongside the male-defined scholarly legacy of the Wife.

Using the lens of Roxanne Gay's theory of "bad feminism," this project has examined the textual details of Alison's character in the original *Canterbury Tales* to argue against a binary understanding of her feminist status. Where Chaucer's interest in social identity as a central structure for the collection creates readerly anticipation for a less-psychologically realized version of the character, the radical content of her prologue and intricacies of her verse indicate otherwise. Though the Wife is not an idealized proto-feminist figure, it is the very flaws that many scholars use to dismantle her feminist status (gossip, violence, sexual liberation) that create the foundation for her contemporary feminist relevance. Despite the prescience of the original text, however, these roots are nonetheless ambiguous and underdeveloped. As such, in my second section, I delineate the many ways that contemporary author Zadie Smith draws out this "bad feminist" foundation in her adaptation, *the Wife of Willesden*. By presenting an anachronistic approach to the original text that aligns itself with amateur medievalist audiences, Smith creates a contemporary version of the character that more easily facilitates connections between the feminism of Chaucer's day and that of our own.

The question of Allison's continued relevance to contemporary feminists is central to this project. Early on in my research, I was struck by how often I heard claims for the Wife's universality. I kept reencountering the term "everywoman" — beginning with Soloski: "The Wife of Bath is an everywoman…" — and I found myself skeptical. The notion of the everywoman, at least in recent years, brings to mind images of pop-feminist icons like Barbie and Taylor Swift: figures whose appeal lies in the false concept of a ubiquitous female

experience, yet whose image reflects a relatively normative understanding of what that experience is or should be. To a certain extent, the Wife could not be further from this version of an everywoman. Few readers will look at her textual experiences and think, "Gosh, *my* fifth husband used to say the same things!" Moreover, despite Chaucer's intricate characterization of the Wife through the rhetoric of her prologue, the character nonetheless presents a distinctly more static image than her everywoman counterparts. Barbie adopts different hairstyles or outfits or careers, and Taylor Swift embodies different aestheticized "eras," both of which serve to create a sense of limited multiplicity within a single body. The Wife, though multifaceted, has neither the flexibility to create an illusion of embodying every woman's experiences and aspirations, nor the aesthetic variation to signal this potential. And yet, as Zadie Smith illustrates in the final scene of *The Wife of Willesden* as Alvita dances along to Chaka Khan's "I'm Every Woman," the character nonetheless bears this moniker of a vague and static feminist icon.

On a surface level, it is not difficult to determine why this might be the case. Returning, once again, to Chaucer's use of social labeling, Alison seemingly cannot escape her title of Wyfe. While she develops dimensionality throughout the collection, she is first introduced to the reader as "the Wife," before she becomes "Alison" — a woman before she is a person. For as much as the details of the text itself resist this simplistic image, both in Chaucer's intricate construction of the character's verse and in Alison's direct rebuttal of a simplified, anti-feminist understanding of universal womanhood, the surface-level version of the Wife— the image of her that we hold in our heads from having learned about her in high school or college—is defined by her gendered identity. The persistent debate concerning her feminist status among amateur medievalists seems to further encourage the desire to uphold her as exemplifying one label or the other, and as those who deem her to be feminist increasingly prevail, she, in turn, becomes a

shorthand for an "ahead of her time" feminist symbol, which, of course, only provokes further debate once readers return to the text. This claim, of course, is heavily reliant on a speculative form of reader response as it is shaped by existing amateur medievalist conversations. However, we do see aspects of the Wife as an "everywoman" bleed into other interpretive texts of the *Canterbury Tales*. One popular example of this is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Though *The Handmaid's Tal*e is not a direct adaptation of the Wife's character, Atwood's explicit references to the *Canterbury Tales* by way of her title and afternote, her thematic interest in issues of textual authority, orality, sexual liberty, and her characters' notable scarlet red attire draw an implicit connection. In examining the world of *The Handmaid's Tale*, one could argue that Atwood critiques the concept of the everywoman by inventing a social structure that explicitly highlights the absurdity of separating women into rigid and contradictory social categories. Amid this potential critique, however, Atwood persists in ignoring the role that other social identities like race, class, and sexuality play in constructing the experience of womanhood. Her constructed dystopia in which white women are the central victims and characters explicitly ignores the extensive history of systemic misogyny and violence directed explicitly at women of color. The very concept of the handmaid as the central figure of the story further reflects an essentialist conception of gender identity as one tied to female biology. This is the danger of "the everywoman" as a literary figure.

I do not see the Wife as an everywoman, and yet, I continue to make arguments for her relevance to contemporary feminists as a "unified" body. I do this, not as a way of claiming, like Soloski does, that every woman can see herself represented by the Wife of Bath, but rather, as a way of returning to the idea of the Wife as a figure who reflects the unified social aspects of womanhood—which is to say, the experience of struggling under the patriarchy. The primary

focus of the Wife's prologue has little to do with her personal experiences—though it is these experiences that readers often use to invalidate her feminist status. The Wife's primary concern relates back to an account of how she and other women are treated under a patriarchal structure.

In the previous section, I talked about the emotional connection that many readers develop when reading the Wife's prologue for the first time. Over the past year of researching her character, I found that I experienced a new side to that connection. I would read about the scholarly history of the figure, and I found myself truly moved by accounts of the many ways in which she had been misinterpreted, hypersexualized, and simplified. I thought of the times that I had felt subject to those perspectives—to being defined by someone else's false and simplified interpretation of me because of my social identity. There are countless historical examples of these misinterpretations of the Wife of Bath; among the most prominent is director Pier Paolo Pasolini's film adaptation *Canterbury Tales*, in which the Wife transforms into an allegorical warning of the dangers of sexual engagement with "an older, experienced woman."[48] As Turner describes it:

> In direct opposition to the life-giving vitality of the young men's sexual experiences with other women in the film, which are accompanied by laughter, fantasy-packed dreams, and ecstasy (and also in opposition to the much-commented-upon vitality of Chaucer's Alison), Pasolini's Wife of Bath is a harbinger of doom. Sex with her actually, literally kills her fourth husband. [On her wedding night with Jankyn], Jankyn is simply not interested in this older woman who is depicted as trying to coerce him into sex….The woman has become the rapist figure.[49]

For Pasolini, where the sexual vitality of the male characters in the film is a symbol of masculinity and "primal vitality"— a trait that is to be protected — when depicting the Wife, this

[48] *Turner*, 206.

[49] Ibid.

same behavior is mocked and demonized.[50] This is particularly evident when comparing the moral treatment of sexuality highlighted in Turner's account with that depicted in the film's release posters (Figure 3).

*Figure 3: Posters for the American (left)[51] and Italian (right)[52] releases of Canterbury Tales*

In both images, Pasolini embraces the sexuality of the female form, but only when it exists as an object of male desire or expression of male dominance — note that in the Italian poster, the only clothed female figure is the Wife of Bath, in the upper left-hand corner.

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[50] Turner, 207.
[51] *Canterbury Tales*, 1972, poster, 1972, https://dyn1.heritagestatic.com/lf?set=path[1%2F2%2F0%2F1%2F1201263]&call=url[file:product.chain].
[52] *I Racconti Di Canterbury*, 1972, poster, 1972, https://filmartgallery.com/cdn/shop/products/The-Canterbury-Tales-Vintage-Movie-Poster-Original-Italian-2-foglio-39x55-3269_e8153967-da49-4d35-bf72-60646272057f_800x.progressive.jpg?v=1663219915.

I don't wish to spend a significant amount of time discussing Pasolini's adaptation, principally because the film is so far removed from Chaucer's original text that it communicates very little about the initial subject matter. However, his film is nonetheless valuable to conversations about the Wife because it reveals yet another flaw in the concept of the everywoman—one that has been present with the Wife since her conception—and that is its potential to encourage claims of universality about a given gender. The creation of a character that represents all of womankind denies the existence of a heterogenous female population. This, in turn, facilitates social agendas like Pasolini's that seek to regulate the range of acceptable or "moral" behaviors along a gender binary; it is much easier to justify and disseminate misogyny if there is one accepted image of womanhood. Adaptations like Smith's are important because they return the Wife to the truth of her character: she is not a reflection of all womankind, yet she is relatable as a reflection of women's experience under the patriarchy. From her fiction husbands to real-life critics like Pasolini, she has consistently been vilified, sexualized, and overly simplified both within the realm of her text and beyond. And yet, despite these efforts, contemporary women continue to identify with her character and story.

To conclude, I want to return one last time to the broad subject of modern feminism. As I state in the first paragraph of this project, and reiterate many times throughout: feminism is, and always has been, complicated. It is easy to view that sense of complexity as the primary source of dissonance and frustration amongst many members of the community (What wave are we on again? Why does it matter?) Yet, at the risk of generalizing, I would argue that it is not feminism's plurality that is the cause of that frustration; rather, it is the pressure to fit within a static and limited definition of feminism that generates this tension. The Wife of Bath as a literary figure has been subject to this pressure for over 700 years; and yet, contemporary

audiences continue to return to her character, not simply in an attempt to answer the question "is she feminist or antifeminist?" but because — like most women themselves — despite all attempts, the Wife of Bath defies categorization.

In an ideal world, at this point in the analysis, I should be allowed to follow Chaucer's model and simply write, "Here the writer of this thesis takes her leave." Better yet, this section could be my retraction, and I would be allowed to take this space to renounce every aspect of this project that might provoke self-consciousness or criticism. Or, even better, I could simply trail off. What could be more fitting for the Wife of Bath than the implication of an everlasting conversation — a continued assertion of one's voice, as if at any point in the imagined, post-trailed-off sentence I might say, "And another thing!" and just keep going.

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