2023

Retelling Tales: Patience Agbabi's Queering of Chaucer's "The Man of Law's Tale"

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16 December 2022

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Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is recognized as a formative text within the canon of English literature. Because of his widely known status, Chaucer and his writings have become the central focus of many medievalists; this does not simply mean the increased presence of critical writings, but also creative works that are inspired by *The Canterbury Tales*. Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* is a contemporary poetic retelling of *The Canterbury Tales* in which she explores the origins of ideas such as diaspora, colonization, racialized thinking, social hierarchy, and binary thinking, only to question these ideas in her own writing. Author Seth Lerer argues, "Constructing literary systems entails positing not just a present of performance but a past of cultural identity. It necessitates the self-conscious invention of a history to literature and, in turn, a definition of the poet's self-appointed role in mediating that history to a present reading, commissioning, or judging community" (Lerer 4). Although Lerer is discussing the ratification of Chaucer into the modern canon of English literature, he is creating a clear line of historical foundations for the practice of rewriting. Agbabi is continuing Chaucer's practice of drawing on his own surroundings to create a tale of the present. Patience Agbabi rewrites "The Man of Law's Tale" into a queer and transnational tale by extracting points of origin from the Middle Ages and rewriting them from a contemporary point of view.

Before diving into these two works, it is necessary to define "queer," "queering," and "to queer" for what they mean in the context of this argument. Amy Hollywood defines queer as, "queerness depends on this conception of the queer as that which defies the norm and the

normative, although the relationship between the two sets of terms is not fully articulated" (Hollywood 174). Following Hollywood's definition, Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale" is the norm that defines its contents as normative, and "Joined-Up Writing" is the queerness that defies this norm. Although it does not always seem as though Agbabi is at direct odds with Chaucer, her creation of a contemporary and increasingly intersectional tale is already a direct queering of Chaucer.

Subversion and queering go hand in hand, so it is helpful to see another thinker that adds onto Hollywood's claims of queering. Although not directly referencing either Agbabi or Chaucer, Manuela Coppola speaks about subversion in a similar way that Hollywood speaks about queering. Coppola's subversion is a way to describe how authors flip a text on its head using literary form and gender expectations (Coppola 375). Like Hollywood, Coppola's theory of subversion necessitates a norm, a control group, to mark the differences that contemporary authors like Patience Agbabi make.

So, why "The Man of Law's Tale?" The original tale, written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the fourteenth century, lives among the historic texts of the literary canon. The Man of Law tells his tale about the young woman, Constance (also seen as Custance) and her journey to Syria and Northumberland from her home in Rome. While she is away from Rome, she converts many people including her two husbands, the Sultan of Syria, and King Alla of Northumberland. While in these foreign lands, she bears a son with King Alla, but the happiness does not last long. Donegild, Alla's mother, intercepts the correspondences between Alla and Constance; Donegild forges false letters from both parties involved so that Constance will leave her family alone.

This tale serves as the control text because of Chaucer's identity within the literary canon. David Matthew describes Chaucer's transformation into a literary founder in the 19th century:

> 'Old poets' are usually 'only valuable because they are old' as Robert Southery wrote in 1807. Chaucer's poetry was not just old, however, but obviously good, and so stood outside antiquarian forms of value and participated in more generally shared regimes of value… Chaucer was not, like everything else in post-Conquest literature, 'Early English'; Chaucer was already literature." (Matthews 165).

David Matthew brings Chaucer's credibility and respect to the forefront to make sure readers fully understand how Agbabi's tale, "Joined-Up Writing" quites "The Man of Law."

While drawing on the characters of Donegild, Alla, and Constance, Patience Agbabi queers Chaucer's tale to create "Joined-Up Writing." Agbabi chooses to focus on Donegild's forgery, showcased by the character Mam in "Joined-Up Writing." Constance's name and actions remain much the same, but Alla has been rewritten as Oliver, Mam's child, who, apparently, has been changed by Constance. Agbabi's rewrite elucidates Chaucer's shortcomings as an author of the past by exposing and focusing on the more problematic parts of Chaucer's tale. However, instead of focusing on his shortcomings, Agbabi's poetic collection focuses on the ways in which Medieval ideas can be adapted to fit and emphasize contemporary ideals.

The essence of quiting comes from the nature of the story-telling competition that shapes *The Canterbury Tales*. To quite, according to the Middle English Compendium, means to compensate, or to requite ("Quite"). Quiting is used among members of the company to try and place themselves above the person who previously spoke. This may be used in terms of telling a better tale with the same theme, the same genre, or simply telling a better tale. It is through this

definition that Agbabi is quiting Chaucer. Chaucer's original "Man of Law's Tale" is quited by Agbabi because she is using the same story to tell a more contemporary and more representative piece.

Ideas of colonization and diaspora shape how Agbabi has read and retold "The Man of Law's Tale." Although Chaucer's original telling is technically transnational, considering the multiple times that borders are crossed, Agbabi is the one who truly took that transnationality and turned it into something queer. Due to the change in time between Chaucer and Agbabi, readers are able to see how the globe is more easily accessible in the modern era and how this can shape works into something that draws from more places with an increased attention to accuracy. Chaucer's seemingly one-dimensional characters are belonging to very cut and clear borders of identity which Agbabi attacks; Agbabi hybridizes the identities of Chaucer's outdated characters with contemporary counterparts to create a more understandable tale for a contemporary audience.

For example, Agbabi's Oliver character queers Chaucer's King Alla character. King Alla is given a much greater sense of autonomy in "The Man of Law's Tale;" the audience sees his initial reactions with Constance which demonstrates their love story, "She hath no wright to whom to make hir mone. / O blood royal that stondest in this drede, / Fer ben thy freendes at thy grete nede! / This Alla king hath swich compassioun, / As gentil herte is fulfild of pitee" (Chaucer ll. 656 – 660). This scene is not only a sign of Constance's vulnerability, but also of King Alla's compassionate spirit that saves a woman who he seems determined to love. Oliver, on the other hand, only seems to exhibit autonomy once in "Joined-Up Writing," "Ollie wrote seven books for Coronet, / his last one's autographed, see here, it's signed / *Oliver Robson*. Every paragraph / pure gold, a fortune in that autograph" (Agbabi ll.11-14). The act of Oliver

signing his name in his own book that he wrote is the only time in this poem that he is given the ability to act or to tell his own side of the story. Oliver's counterpart, King Alla, was an agent of conversion and action in "The Man of Law," so why is Oliver being shoved aside in this tale? Oliver's erasure is yet another way of subverting the original theme into something more indicative of our present. Oliver still meets and marries Constance, but their meeting is pushed aside in favor of Mam's thoughts and feelings. This hybridization of character is indicative of what Jahan Ramazani calls a "transnational collage" which is a "'practice of displacement' that instance this cross-cultural generation of meanings" (Ramazani 336). This so-called collage of transnationalism is only possible due to the passage of time – time has become another nation for Agbabi to travel across to fully form this collage of a character.

A crucial aspect of colonization and diaspora is the concept of "othering." Othering occurs when there is, once again, a norm, and because this norm is so powerful, it has the power to completely overshadow the submissive counterpart. When considering "The Man of Law's Tale" and "Joined-Up Writing," together, the change in location and difference in homelands spark characters in both stories to "other" those around them. Chaucer, speaking through Donegild here, employs various descriptors from lines 751 to 755 to describe Constance, her child, and the method of Constance's child's conception, "so horrible a feendly creature… an elf, by aventure" (Chaucer ll. 751-754). Feendly, according to the Middle English Compendium, means "Like the devil, or coming from the Devil" ("Feendly") and elf is, generally, "a supernatural being having magical powers for good or evil" ("Elf"). Both words, feendly and elf, are decidedly not human, thus fueling further ammunition for Constance's removal, via Donegild, from Northumberland.

Agbabi carries this tradition forward through her own Donegild character, Mam, and her descriptions of Constance, “She wasn’t bonny, always overdressed, / I’d never understand her when she spoke. / Not that I’m prejudiced, some of my best / friends are foreign” (Agbabi ll. 23 – 26). Once again, the trait that is truly highlighted, is that of Constance’s foreignness. Susan Schibanoff brings this to light regarding Constance’s repeated othering, “with another world, another time, ultimately with the Other, in order to forgoe a sense of community – that is fraternity – among them” (Schibanoff 569). Schibanoff is reiterating the inherent alienation of othering. This alienation prevents the construction of a full community in exchange for a conservation of a supposedly homogenous community; the homogenous community in question is one that thrives on oppression and othering.

Another way in which othering is utilized is to demonstrate a constructed and confrontational difference among the different identities created through colonization and diaspora. Agbabi takes the bland and less diverse medieval company and translates that into a more accurate and contemporary tale based on how colonization and diasporic actions have led to all people being placed all around the globe. Although this sounds like a progressive step forward in the history of taletelling, this can form a space that supports the racism that has continued to seep through into everyday life. In lines 26-31 of “Joined-Up Writing,” Agbabi is describing the contemporary Constance as so,

> “These days folk are folk
> but then was different: Constance was coloured, brown,
> a name so long you’d sweat to break it down.
> 2.
> Didn’t belong, nigh verging on a breakdown

and Ollie such a softie. African."

Mam's hatred towards Constance is heavily influenced by racial hate which quites Chaucer's emphasis on ethnic hate. In lines 375-378 Chaucer tells of an instance of othering among Christian and Islamic people,

She rydeth to the Sowdan on a day,
And seyde him that she wolde renery hir ley
And Cristendom of preestes handes fonge,
Repenting hire she hethen was so longe.

Once again, even though Agbabi is bringing this form of hatred into the contemporary world, she is still quiting Chaucer due to her tale that crosses the border of time; this cross is also telling of the colonizing and diasporic ideals that have stemmed from medieval Chaucer.

As the previous paragraph emphasized, racialized thinking and social hierarchy are closely tied with theories of colonization and diaspora. The previous paragraph also discusses the construction of identity, but a character's construction as a vessel for subverting the normative social hierarchy operates differently. Chaucer's female characters are often only seen as an amalgamation of tropes rather than actual people, therefore simply a constructed persona. Agbabi realizes the boundaries that Chaucer set for his female characters, to be available for their husbands' pleasure, and expels that boundary to form a sentient and fully fleshed character. She has taken a supposedly concrete idea of race and identity from the Middle Ages and exposes its flaws through the creation of her own characters, especially Mam. Pamela A. Patton reiterates this method of quiting through construction, "[The complex significance of skin color] reveals and challenges the mechanisms beneath both medieval and modern notions of race, difference and self" (Patton 164). This complex significance signified by a cross-temporal construction

provides a perfect origin point for Agbabi's queering process. Agbabi is drawing on a practice of othering that dates back to Chaucer so as to strengthen her retelling.

The social hierarchy is not just limited to how Agbabi creates actual female characters from Chaucer's stylized tropes, but also how the power structures of these characters are acknowledged and possibly subverted. Chaucer's depiction of power between men and women can be seen from lines 709-714 of "The Man of Law's Tale,"

> "For though that wyves been ful holy thinges,
> they moste take in pacience at night
> Swich maner necessaries as been plesinges
> to folk that han y-wedded hem with ringes,
> And Leye a lyte hir holinesse aside
> As for the tyme – it may no bet bityde" (Chaucer ll.709-714).

Chaucer is establishing female subservience to their husbands by using phrases like, "Swich maner necessaries as been plesinges / to folk that han y-wedded hem with ringes." The subservient behavior is "necessaries" and therefore not up for debate. Chaucer's societal constructions remain concrete and unmovable.

Agbabi, on the other hand, and "Joined-Up Writing" is more concerned with Mam's power and how that power is exerted onto other characters. Lines 58 – 60 of the poem states, "I took a fresh white sheet and scrawled the line: / *Dear Constance, Whore of Babylon, unchaste / you lied about the rape, the child's not mine*…" (Agbabi ll. 58-60). Agbabi chooses to maintain this masculine power of Donegild, as reflected in Mam, to emphasize how the "Man of Law pairs the scene in which Donegild employs a traditionally masculine agent -the phallic pen – to enact her own desires and 'depaternalize' her son" (Schibanoff 592). So how does this exemplify

a quiting of Chaucer's powerless Constance? Isn't it simply a retelling of Donegild's power? Agbabi quites Chaucer's structure because she is now placing Mam at the forefront, as a multi-dimensional character who suffers her success rather than simply disappearing after her task has been completed; she has to deal with the aftermath which makes her more understandable to the contemporary audience.

The different dynamics of power between Constance and Donegild and Constance and Mam shape both texts, but how do they relate to, and queer one another? In "The Man of Law's Tale" Constance is the normative female figure; she is the ideal race, religion, and temperament for a female character, and yet she is still thrown aside. This is meant to be a trial that shows her strength while also creating admiration towards her character and all that she represents. On the other hand, in "Joined-Up Writing," Constance is completely othered by Mam. Constance is African in a white England, Christian in an increasingly secular world, and is consistently, and deliberately, othered with words with evil connotations. When Mam commits her act of forgery, Agbabi's shifted norm becomes very clear. But Mam cannot be the ideal, can she? She sees herself as this normative figure, but she lacks sympathy from the audience since she is the one committing an actual crime here. And yet, Mam is the character who has all the power to "other" Constance and throw her aside.

Constance's transformation is not brought on by herself or her own actions. Mam had the authority to make a decision and to change the outcome of the story, therefore readers are given a closer look into how her emotions shift and fluctuate as she comes to terms with what her life may look like without her son's presence. Constance, on the other hand, is a character with little to no agency. This change in her visage is brought on by Donegild, and therefore her lack of agency is more telling than her actual shift in "identity."

However, it is interesting to consider how Constance's marriage in "Joined-Up Writing" is once again delegated as something that happened *to* her rather than having her act as an equal partner in this interaction. Only Oliver is given the agency to sign – not Constance, "She must have used Black Magic that dark day / to make him say *I do* and sign his name / We all lived here, I had no choice, she'd won" (Agbabi 39-42). Although Mam is assuming that Constance may have used magic to trick Oliver into marrying her, this is a very passive action; it is an action that cannot and will not be proven within the context of the work. Black Magic also very clearly resonates with Chaucer's usage of "elf" as seen in line 754 of "The Man of Law's Tale." Both words are imbued with a practice that is both alien and unknown to Mam and Donegild; the mystery of Constance is what makes both women so uneasy. Black Magic is also inherently racialized since it does give a specific color to this "evil" practice.

Racialized lives and the interference of social hierarchy coincide with the actual locations of the stories. The fact that both texts are highly centered around the physical locations of Rome and England is highly telling of the identities of both as texts that support and proliferate colonial and imperial ideas. Agbabi's English vs Africa dichotomy quites Chaucer's Christian Rome vs outsider non-Christian cultures through the transfer of time and its palatability to the contemporary audience. This quiting also seems to feed into how these structures live and breathe today. But why does Agbabi still choose to represent this? A creative work does not have to represent real life and the normative rules that society lives by – so why replicate them? Agbabi replicates these tales because she is fulfilling her purpose of the retelling. Oftentimes, it is what remains closest to the norm that gets remembered, so this attempt at subversive queering gives Agbabi a voice. Thematically, if Agbabi did not retain these structures and methods of oppression, it would not be a retelling of "The Man of Law's Tale." Unfortunately, much of the

foundation of Chaucer's tale lays on othering so that Constance can rise to the top as the perfect example of feminine identity. If Agbabi did not play with these structures, it would not represent the tale it is retelling. Just because she has these structures does not mean she is supporting them. In fact, she is forcing readers to question these systems of oppression by queering the past that they thrived in.

How does Constance's identity as a vessel for conversion in "The Man of Law's Tale" exemplify a social hierarchy? Since she is established as the "perfect person" in lines 157-159, "A doghter hath that, sin the world bigan, since / To rekne as wel hir goodnesse as beautee reckon, take account of / Nas never swich another as is she" (Chaucer ll.157-159), Constance is both the peak of femininity, but also the peak of Christian ideals. The comparison between goodnesse and beautee is a declaration of her moral excellency as something tied to her intense beauty. Constance's grand beauty and goodness implies an othering of all other characters, "the potential not just to describe, but to delimit and essentialize specific groups of people in a way that accommodated them to a preexisting social hierarchy" (Patton 156). It is through this characterization of Constance that the harsh and oppressive preexisting conditions of patriarchy are allowed to continue. Agbabi's refusal to have Mam give more than Constance's skin color, religion, and assault is perhaps another instance of Agbabi's quiting one of Chaucer's problematic seeds. A refusal to give details about Constance's character makes it much easier to other her.

Mam is the most prevalent character in terms of a created identity within "Joined-Up Writing." Within only twenty lines, lines fifty to seventy, Mam is seen as both a nurturant and caring mother as well as a conniving and deceitful figure, "stabbed by his pen, I felt. Stabbed in the face… / I taught my son to write / his name when he was four. I trained his hand / to copy

mine" (Agbabi ll.56 – 66). No "true answer" to Mam's identity can be found, but readers are still shown the dimensionality of her character. Robert Bartlett asserts that "Different identities can be asserted in different situations. It is certainly not the case that a 'true answer' could be found" (Bartlett 40). Although Bartlett is discussing medieval constructions of identity, this theory of not being able to attain a single truth of an identity is more reminiscent of how Agbabi creates a more intersectional characters like Mam, who act and react like actual people. An intersectional character is one that draws on multiple aspects of identity; Mam is reflecting contemporary identities that can no longer simply reflect only one cultural background. She is assumed to be white, yes, but she is also situated at the intersections of Christianity and Atheism, living in a transnational and increasingly global world, and living at an intersection of time between her past ideals and the present.

Something that goes together with questioning binary thinking is the presence of, and refutation of, dichotomies. According to Helen Van Praet rewritings can, "question 'compartmentalized' thinking about literature by refusing false dichotomies" (Van Praet 77). Van Praet rejects the idea that characters must be one thing that one thing must resemble a norm. Agbabi utilizes this theory and technique to further queer Chaucer's characters and scenes through a less black and white view.

From this questioning of identity through dichotomies, there also arises a question of religious dichotomies. How is the dichotomy between religions created and proliferated by Chaucer and Agbabi? Chaucer's constant othering of Islam enlarges the sense of good and evil between Christianity and Islam. Susan Schibanoff describes this relationship of othering in relation to religion as, "Man of Law constructs the Other in tightly intertwined guises in his tale – as Saracen or Muslim, as woman, as heretic – and that the lawyer repeatedly performs a

reductive rhetorical maneuver in order to induce Christian fraternity among the pilgrims" (Schibanoff 570). By rejecting and othering Muslims and their ways of life, it is assumed that the relations among Christian people increases. If anything, this increase is spurred by a communal distaste towards the common enemy of Islamic people.

Does something have to be rejected to be queered? From lines thirty-seven to thirty-eight, Agbabi presents the dichotomy of Christianity against atheism, "marched him off to church twice on a Sunday! / Ollie, the atheist, who had no shame" (Agbabi 37-38). By rewriting Chaucer's religious dichotomy into a more contemporary religious debate, she is queering the experience of King Alla and Constance into a relationship that reflects contemporary England and the dynamics of Christianity from the Global South against an increasingly secular Global North. Although she is feeding into the continuation of binary thinking and religious othering, Agbabi is also quiting Chaucer's more conservative and hateful tale due to "Joined-Up Writing's" status as a contemporary work that crosses the borders of time and culture that Chaucer was unable to do. Agbabi's ability and willingness to create an intersectional tale shapes her ability to quite and queer Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale."

Another way that Agbabi refutes this nature of binary structures presented by Chaucer, is through Mam's dimensionality as a character. As mentioned on the previous page, her multi-faceted identity is inherently layered and intersectional, but Mam also exemplifies how it is more nature to exist in the middle ground, a refutation of the binary, rather than to live as an amalgamation of tropes, like Chaucer's Constance does. The contemporary character of Mam is a direct descendant of Donegild because of Agbabi's queering of this character and her previous heterogenous nature.

Agbabi quites Chaucer's binary vision of place and location by incorporating language from "The Man of Law's Tale" to "Joined-Up Writing." One way that language serves as a tool for quiting is by emphasizing how words change and shift in many of the same ways that humans and characters do. Candace Barrington and Jonathon Hsy state that "[this] allows medieval scholars to incorporate heterogenous places and times into richer understanding of and affection for a medieval past – and to appreciate a dynamic and ever-changing present" (Barrington and Hsy 159). Barrington and Hsy acknowledge how the outsiders, the medievalists, can incorporate intersectional theory into their writings because of the appreciation of the past, and understanding of the past, and a presence within contemporary times. This can lead to a clearer map of language and its use over time as well as themes and character creations.

One instance that marks this history of language resides in lines 59-60 of "Joined-Up Writing," "*Dear Constance, Whore of Babylon, unchaste, / you lied about the rape, the child's not mine*…" and lines 754-755 of Chaucer's "Man of Law's Tale," "The moder was an elf, by aventure / Y-come by charmes or by sorcerye." These two passages in particular display a real and true intent to follow binaries and false dichotomies regarding people's feelings and emotions as defined by their identities. The focus on Constance being from Babylon, and then a foreign elf, leads readers to assume that foreignness was not appreciated in both medieval times as well as the contemporary times in which Agbabi is writing.

There is also a fear and distrust of both Constance characters as mothers and nurturers of children. There is very obviously hateful language coming from Mam as she defiles Constance's image with words like "whore" and accusing her of lying about a sexual assault. The "Whore of Babylon" is a biblical reference from the Christian Bible. Chapter seventeen of the Book of Revelations creates this monstruous feminine figure who Agbabi is calling on to represent

Constance. The Whore of Babylon is constructed as an alien and other-worldly figure. Not only is Constance's sexuality called into question, but also her ability to mother because of the Whore of Babylon's identity as the mother of all prostitutes. Similarly, Donegild is calling Constance an elf, which can also refer to an incubus / succubus figure (Middle English Compendium). This sexual deviancy is yet another way of othering these two women as further away from the side of the binary that they wish to reside on.

One final way to look within these two texts is how Agbabi seem to disappear within the text, "self is displaced from the centre of the work and the teller disappears into the telling" (Van Praet 77). By retelling "The Man of Law's Tale" Agbabi's own voice can be easily covered up by Chaucer's canonicity and the views that define and shape his tale. The balance that Agbabi must achieve between queering and sticking to the original story is very precarious, yet also telling of her theme and purpose of the increasingly intersectional tale that she is telling.

Although Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is recognized as a formative text within the canon of English literature Patience Agbabi's "Joined-Up Writing," one poem as part of her collection *Telling Tales*, queers *The Canterbury Tales* to rewrite medieval societal relationships into something a contemporary reader can see, understand, and relate to. Through Agbabi's discovery, confrontation, and retelling of Chaucer's seeds, she forces readers to consider the truth and validation of Chaucer's identity as a formative author. By drawing on a historical tradition of quiting, Agbabi queers "The Man of Law's Tale" into a transnational rendition by rewriting Chaucer from a contemporary point of view.

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