

Postmodern Poetry and Queer Medievalisms: Time Mechanics

New Queer Medievalisms

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Postmodern Poetry and Queer Medievalisms: Time Mechanics

Edited by
David Hadbawnik

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Jonathan Hsy and Candace Barrington

Queer Time, Queer Forms: Noir Medievalism and Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales*

The time of medievalism is anything but straight. Queer theorists have long explored how ways of knowing, feeling, and desiring diverge from heteronormative drives—and also how queer temporalities and lifeways evade linear and progressive models.¹ Within medieval literary and cultural studies, the queer scholarship of Carolyn Dinshaw has shown how “studying the Middle Ages” and interpreting modern forms of medievalism are both ultimately “about desire—for another time, for meaning, for life.”² Inhabiting a similarly queer orientation toward medieval studies, Jonathan Hsy has emphasized how the vibrant field of medievalism studies—that is, the critical analysis of contemporary artistic and cultural adaptations of medieval materials—entails a versatile practice of “cognitive multitasking,” a flexible “channel-flipping orientation toward time” that understands the cultural productions of the Middle Ages in their “own” historical circumstances as well as their divergent receptions throughout subsequent time periods.³ From a different perspective, Candace Barrington has shown that contemporary retellings of medieval texts offer insight into the original texts by operating outside “the master narrative that both guides and hampers academic imagination.”⁴

In this co-authored essay, we seek to explore how a multidirectional mindset (as Hsy describes) and an embrace of non-academic readings (as Barrington describes) allow medievalism scholars to incorporate heterogeneous places and times into a richer understanding of and affection for a medieval past—and to appreciate a dynamic ongoing relationship between the historical past and our own diverse and ever-changing present. We jointly accept Dinshaw’s call for ex-

1 See J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); see also José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); and Kathryn Boyd Stockton, *The Queer Child: Or, Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

2 Carolyn Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 32.

3 Jonathan Hsy, “Co-disciplinarity,” in *Medievalism: Key Critical Terms*, ed. Elizabeth Emery and Richard Utz (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 43.

4 Candace Barrington, *American Chaucers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 160.

panding the scope of those traditionally identified with “expert knowledge production” beyond academics per se, by attending to the intellectual and artistic contributions of a modern group of Chaucer’s interlocutors—contemporary poets—who offer “different ways of knowing and sources of knowledge, and different purposes and goals.”⁵ Reading Chaucer alongside one such poet, Nigerian-British author and spoken-word performance artist Patience Agbabi, allows us to avoid what Stephanie Trigg and Thomas Prendergast have identified as “a cautious professionalism that codes the Middle Ages as distant, remote and all but unreachable.”⁶

Our collaborative essay explores how queer approaches to the time of medievalism, as well as medievalist scholarship grounded in queer diaspora studies, can inform the complex “queer time” of Agbabi’s neo-Chaucerian poetry collection *Telling Tales* (2014). In acknowledgment of her own deep engagements with contemporary urban musical and performance genres, Agbabi calls her work a “remixed” transformation of all extant narratives within *The Canterbury Tales*.⁷ Agbabi’s “remix” is just one of the most recent contributions to a multifaceted range of modern Chaucerian poetic adaptations by Black and African diaspora women, each of whom reinvents the medieval poet’s work “as a vehicle for exploring contemporary African diasporic identities”⁸ and relocates the medieval Chaucerian storytelling context to a new time and place.⁹ Jean “Binta” Breeze’s much-anthologized “The Wife of Bath Speaks in Brixton Market” (2000) reincarnates Chaucer’s character through versified Jamaican *patois*;¹⁰ Marilyn Nelson, who uses iambic pentameter couplets throughout *The Cachoeira Tales* (2005), traces a rerouted African American “reverse diaspora” pilgrimage to Black regions of Brazil;¹¹ Karen King-Aribisala, whose novel *Kicking Tongues* (1998) incorporates prose and poetry and Nigerian Pidgin English vernacular, tells stories of trauma, migration, and recovery in post-independence Nigeria;¹² and Ufuoma

5 Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, 38.

6 Thomas Prendergast and Stephanie Trigg, *Affective Medievalism: Love, Abjection and Discontent* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 113.

7 Patience Agbabi, “Stories in Stanza’d English: A Cross-Cultural *Canterbury Tales*,” *Literature Compass* 15, no. 6 (June 2018): 2.

8 Kathleen Forni, *Chaucer’s Afterlife: Adaptations in Recent Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), 106.

9 Candace Barrington and Jonathan Hsy, “Afterlives,” in *A New Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Peter Brown (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 15–17.

10 Michelle R. Warren, “‘The Last Syllable of Modernity’: Chaucer and the Carribean,” *postmedieval* 6, no. 1 (2015): 79–93.

11 David Wallace, “New Chaucer Topographies,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007): 3–19.

12 See Forni, *Chaucer’s Afterlife*.

Overo-Tarimo, whose Nigerian Pidgin English play *Wahala Dey O!* (2012) incorporates dialogue and musical performances, transplants Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* to contemporary Nigeria.¹³

If Agbabi is read alongside this heterogeneous range of cultural productions by Black and African diaspora women, her *Telling Tales* emerges as distinctive—and not just because the author has identified in previous contexts as bicultural and queer.¹⁴ With an ear attuned to Chaucerian polyvocality, Agbabi relocates her Chaucerian storytelling context to a multiracial contemporary Britain and, in the process, reassigns the racial and gendered perspectives of many of the narrators and their stories. Like her earlier collection, *Transformatrix*, which “focuses on language as infinitely malleable and constructive of new realities,” her Chaucerian retelling transforms the past so that it can reflect the way Britain is now.¹⁵ Despite the apparent dissimilarity between Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and Agbabi's *Telling Tales* in length, language, and forms, the connection is recognizable. *Telling Tales* imaginatively recreates the pilgrimage ritual, moving from horseback and foot along the road between London and Canterbury to a Routemaster bus. Agbabi's multiracial and queer adaptation profoundly reorients Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* for modern audiences, radically transforming the medieval poet's configurations of time, gender, and desire. Although Chaucer's text remains the “ground base” (to borrow Louise D'Arcens's term) for Agbabi's collection,¹⁶ Agbabi's poems cede no authority to the fourteenth-century poems. Indeed, while Agbabi brings distant voices to the present via voices of England's performance poetry circuit, she invites professional medievalists to reconsider what we thought we knew about Chaucer, his tales, and his characters.

Our essay focuses on both the formal qualities and the queer dimensions of three poems within *Telling Tales*: “Unfinished Business,” Agbabi's adaptation of Chaucer's prose *Tale of Melibee* (transformed into a mirror poem); “I Go Back to May 1967,” her realignment of Chaucer's *The Clerk's Tale* (condensed into a free-verse, personal narrative); and “Joined-Up Writing,” her rendition of Chaucer's

13 Ufuoma Overo-Tarimo, *The Miller's Tale: Wahala Dey O! A Nigerian Play Adaptation of Chaucer's Canterbury Tale*, ed. Jessica Lockhart, with Aleheh Amimi, Mussié Berhane, Mahera Islam, and Justin Phillips (Toronto: University of Toronto-Mississauga, 2018); see also Candace Barrington, “Global Medievalism and Translation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism*, ed. Louise D'Arcens (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016): 180–95.

14 Manuela Coppola, “Queering Sonnets: Sexuality and Transnational Identity in the Poetry of Patience Agbabi,” *Women: A Cultural Review* 26, no. 4 (2015): 369–83.

15 Romana Huk, “Lyric Returns in Recent Black British Poetry,” *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 12 (2019): 5.

16 Louise D'Arcens, “From ‘Eccentric Affiliation’ to ‘Corrective Medievalism’”: Bruce Holsinger's *The Premodern Condition*,” *postmedieval* 1, no. 3 (2010): 301.

stanzaic *Man of Law's Tale* (converted into a crown of sonnets). These three retellings each use a poetic structure that loops back to its beginning (the final line being a verbatim or nearly word-for-word or sense-for-sense repetition of the first), and each poem through its very structure conspicuously fails—or rather, refuses—to submit to a linear, progressive model of time. Each of Agbabi's three poems features a marriage in trouble (one due to an act of violence against women, one due to spousal abuse, and the other due to racist xenophobia directed toward an African woman specifically). Not only do these works grapple with the complexity of affective, single-sex bonds and the dangers of heteronormative marriages, but each poem's narrative also reveals a complex racialized dimension to queerness. In these ways, Agbabi's poems use medievalism to explore nuanced desires that move across bodies, borders, and time.

To explore Agbabi's queer medievalism, this essay devotes one section to each poem. Each section is neither linear nor progressive but rather a constellation of close readings and meditations on the queer formal qualities of Agbabi's poetry, the sociopolitical implications of the poet's medievalism, and the layered understandings that arise through acts of reading and re-reading Chaucer's three tales. In this essay, we attend to how Agbabi queers Chaucer and his texts, which have long been used to support, justify, and legitimize centuries of racism, homophobia, and sexism.¹⁷ Agbabi's poetry does not present *Telling Tales* as a modern corrective to a fourteenth-century "original" text, but rather as part of a mirroring, a circling back to rethink the medieval past and its presence in the present.

Queer *Melibee*: "Unfinished Business"

The mirroring structure of Agbabi's remix of Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, "Unfinished Business," creates a recursive chain of poetic translation and adaptation that invites us to reverse the usual trajectory of adaptation study. That is, the essay takes the adaptation as the point of orientation for understanding or interpreting the original. In this reversed hermeneutics, the adaptation is no longer a

17 See Carissa Harris, "'It is a brotherhood': Obscene Storytelling and Fraternal Community in Fifteenth-Century Britain and Today," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 41 (2019): 249–76, and "Rape and Justice in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*," in *The Open Access Companion to The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Candace Barrington, Brantley L. Bryant, Richard H. Godden, Daniel T. Kline, and Myra Seaman (2017), <https://opencanterburytales.dsl.lsu.edu/>; see also Jonathan Hsy, *Antiracist Medievalisms: From "Yellow Peril" to Black Lives Matter* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2021), 1–3, 24–25, and 115–32.

secondary or “derivative” version of the original but a work in ongoing and perpetual dialogue with its counterpart. When we circle back and look at Chaucer’s text, Agbabi’s poem will provide the mirrors allowing us to see Chaucer’s *Melibee* anew.

In writing about “Unfinished Business,” we are returning to some of our own unfinished business. In 2015, we published “Remediated Verse: Chaucer’s *Tale of Melibee* and Patience Agbabi’s ‘Unfinished Business’” in *postmedieval*. We had used as our base text a version of the poem that antedated *Telling Tales* and did not have affiliated with it an “author biography,” part of a series of fictional biographies for each tale-teller that functions like Chaucer’s *General Prologue* and appears at the end of the tale collection. Throughout the article, we had referred to “Mel” using masculine pronouns. We knew that “Unfinished Business” was a retelling of *The Tale of Melibee*, and that Chaucer’s omniscient narrator describes Melibee as a “yong man ... mighty and riche” (7967) who is grappling with the aftermath of physical violence against his “wyf” (7967).¹⁸ Agbabi’s Mel is similarly considering how to respond to recent violence against “my wife.”¹⁹ When we read the full collection after our article had gone to press, we were disoriented to learn *Telling Tales*’s “Author Biographies” uses the phrase “her poem:” “Mel O’Brien was born in Belfast, raised in Chatham and teaches English at a secondary school in Gravesend, Kent. Her poem was inspired by *The Long Memory* (1953) starring John Mills, filmed in and around Gravesend.”²⁰ Agbabi’s use of the pronoun “her” for Mel exposed our own unthinkingly heteronormative reading practices. By ascribing her own version of *Melibee* to a woman named Mel, Agbabi profoundly transforms the gendered dimensions of the poem. Mel could be speaking as a woman responding to violence against her wife, or speaking in the persona of a man in the same situation. In either case, Agbabi’s Mel speaks in first person (“my wife”), leaving the reader to determine how, or if, to ascribe any definitive gender identity to the “I” in the poem.

Agbabi’s “Unfinished Business” is also innovative as one of the few renditions of *The Tale of Melibee* (either as an adaptation or a modernization, in prose or in poetry) in Present-Day English (PDE). Online resources indicate multiple modernizations, but (at the time we wrote this essay) all had dead links but one, a site that is part of a larger project to bring Middle English romances to the

18 Unless noted otherwise, all quotations and line numbers from Chaucer follow *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

19 Patience Agbabi, *Telling Tales* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), 4.

20 Agbabi, *Telling*, 18.

common reader.²¹ Among print publications, Tatlock and MacKaye's *The Complete Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1912) provides the opening and closing paragraphs, with a bracketed note standing in for the missing lines: "*The greater part of the tale, consisting of the advice of Melibeus' wife and friends, is here omitted.*"²² David Wright's prose modernization's page-length note explains why he's substituted a one-paragraph summary for the "wearisome" tale.²³ Subsequent printed modernizations have been even less generous, omitting the entire tale, a move also not uncommon in modern Middle English editions.²⁴ These omissions are allowed to go unremarked because *Melibee* is considered one of Chaucer's least inventive, most hidebound translations of an already tedious text.²⁵ Cast as dull and dreary by modern readers, *Melibee* has been seen as more of a commentary on the tale-teller—Chaucer himself—whose two entries in the tale-telling competition are failures.²⁶

In contrast to this inglorious past, *Melibee*'s reincarnation bursts forth in poetic form as "Unfinished Business," a confident performance of everything that *Melibee* is not. Mediating between the medieval past and the present, the poem "Unfinished Business" visually manifests Agbabi's complex strategy of transformation. Transmuting Chaucer's prose into verse, she condenses over 900 lines of Chaucerian prose into 32 lines of verse: 16 (off-)rhyming couplets presented in two stanzas. Just as crucial is Agbabi's queer reconception of Melibee and "his wyf" as Mel and her/his wife. The verbose *Tale of Melibee* is radically converted through Agbabi's verse into a tight retelling that queers the form and content of the Melibeian narrative.

Agbabi's sophisticated rerouting of the tale's reception history provokes a three-pronged question: what does it mean that Agbabi not only remixed the tale, but that she (a) made it among the shortest of her tales, (b) transformed

21 Richard Scott-Robinson, "Geoffrey's Tale of Melibeus and His Wife Prudence," *Old Tales Rebound* (2009): <http://eleusinianm.co.uk/middle-english-literature-retold-in-modern-english/works-by-geoffrey-chaucer/melibeus>.

22 John S. P. Tatlock and Percy MacKaye, *The Complete Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer: Now First Put into Modern English* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 112.

23 David Wright, *The Canterbury Tales: A Prose Version in Modern English* (New York: Random House, 1964), 127.

24 See Peter Ackroyd, *The Canterbury Tales: A Retelling* (London: Penguin, 2009); Sheila Fisher, *The Selected Canterbury Tales: A New Verse Translation* (New York: Norton, 2011); and Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 164.

25 Carolyn P. Collette, "Heeding the Counsel of Prudence: A Context for the 'Melibee,'" *The Chaucer Review* 29, no. 4 (1995): 416–19.

26 Lee Patterson, "'What Man Artow?': Authorial Self-Definition in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and the *Tale of Melibee*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 13 (1991): 117–75.

it into one of her collection's most accessible poems, and (c) marked it for notice by making it one of the most formally sophisticated and complex poems in the collection? One answer is that Agbabi has rewritten Chaucer-the-pilgrim's tale to be her own calling card, a suggestion re-inforced in the "Prologue (Grime Mix)" to *Telling Tales*: "Chaucer Tales were an unfinished business. May the best poet lose, as the saying goes."²⁷ By going beyond the tradition of reworking the tale to meet scribal needs or audience demands, she delivers a dazzling poetic performance that reinforces her place (as Canterbury Laureate from 2009–2010) among the poets in the Chaucerian lineage of England's poets laureate.²⁸ In as few lines as possible, "Unfinished Business" demonstrates that Agbabi's *business* is being a poet.

In many ways, a poet who appropriates and retells a Chaucerian tale resembles the "amateur"—or lover—of medieval literature that Dinshaw's *How Soon is Now?* holds up for analysis, in contrast to professionals who study, teach, and write *about* medieval literature. If, however, we remember that Agbabi is an established, Oxford-trained, spoken-word poet, then she more closely resembles the hybrid that Richard Godden describes: someone who studies Chaucer and writes poetry as a professional calling, not a weekend avocation, yet who nevertheless receives deep satisfaction from their engagement with the poet.²⁹ Building upon Dinshaw's description of "bricolage" (but eschewing both her term "amateur" and Godden's "nerd"), we see Agbabi's "remix" as "bringing whatever can be found, whatever works to the activity."³⁰ Agbabi's reconception of a canonical text "provides an opening of potential otherwise foreclosed" and "different ways of knowing and sources of knowledge."³¹ By freely inhabiting multiple temporalities, she begins to exact "justice for past exclusions and injustice."³² Agbabi not only writes a poem that brings a queer sensibility to a poem authored by the canonical, patricarchal, and misogynist "father" of English poetry, but she also profoundly rethinks time, affect, and justice in the process.

Agbabi's retelling of Chaucer's tale reminds us that one of the ways contemporary scholars have recalled the *Melibee* from the wastelands of tedium (an exile for which modern readers are primarily responsible) has been through po-

²⁷ Agbabi, *Telling*, 2.

²⁸ Seth Lerer, *Chaucer and His Readers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 95.

²⁹ Richard H. Godden, "Nerds, Love, Amateurs: Reflections on *How Soon is Now?*," *Modern Medieval* 29 (March 2013): <http://modernmedieval.blogspot.com.au/2013/03/nerds-love-amateurs-reflections-on-how.html>.

³⁰ Dinshaw, *How Soon is Now?*, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³² *Ibid.*, 34.

litical readings. These interpretations generally emphasize the tale's affiliations with the "advice to princes" genre and end up arguing something along the lines that the *Tale of Melibee* "employs a marginal figure"—a woman—"to tell the king what he would not otherwise hear."³³ End of story. If, however, we consider what Prudence says about Melibee's "bisynesse," that it is to "geten hym a good name," a process that must be constantly renewed and repeated, then the tale's ending is really only preparing Melibee for the next iteration of getting his "good name." Prudence is not arguing for a "one-and-done" approach; instead, she is making a case for the behaviors that are the tale's distinguishing feature: doing and saying the same right thing over and over. As Prudence makes her case, right action doesn't look singular; instead, it appears as the multiple reflections in an infinity mirror.

"Unfinished Business" queerly occupies two kinds of time: mythic time of the Bible and quantifiable time of days, nights, and weeks. On the one hand, each can be seen as linear. Biblical time moves inextricably (yet mysteriously) toward the final moment of Judgment. Calendrical time marches forward, with nighttime following daytime, days following days, forming clusters of weeks, months, and years that progress along a timeline ticking forward. On the other hand, each kind of time can be seen as circular or recursive. Biblical time, with its allegorical prolepticism, merely repeats what has already occurred, either in historical time or in God's eye. The Bible provides a template for the cycle of holy-days and holidays, repeated weekly and annually. Calendars, too, turn back on themselves, with those weeks, months, and years forming recognizable, reiterable units.

"Unfinished Business" gestures towards Biblical time by comparing a rain-storm that happened on the night of the attack to the 40-day rain that destroyed the earth's terrestrial creatures while Noah, his family, and their menagerie waited out the flood in a boat. It simultaneously points to past events, and brings that past, with its threats of destruction, to the present. More persistently, the poem records the passing days and nights, marking them with "That night," "It's been a week," and "Tonight," words that in the first stanza would seem to bring us causally from the events that happened at night a week ago, to the present, tonight.³⁴ Within those days and nights, the Thames' tide's rise and fall is the only timekeeping feature that remains in place when the sequence of events reverse in the second stanza, taking us from "Tonight" to "that

33 Lynn Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2005), 39.

34 Agbabi, *Telling*, 86.

night" a week ago.³⁵ Defying either circularity or linearity, we see the speaker's knot of indecision caught in time's queer web.

Because they mark time's passage, the mirrored stanzas in "Unfinished Business" are reflections, not perfect reproductions, of one another. The word order in each line remains the same, yet their semantic functions and syntactical relationships are shifted in three ways: each line is punctuated differently; each line is now in a different sequential relationship with the other lines; and, each word and line has a relationship with the corresponding words and lines in the other stanza. These three shifts are visible at the poem's hinge:

How can I forgive?

How can I forgive
none of them?³⁶

In these three ways, the mirrored stanzas provide a new perspective on familiar terrain. Because Agbabi empowers her typographical marks to "dictate the message," and because the mirrored stanzas cause "none of them" to follow "how can I forgive?" in the second iteration, the first stanza wonders "How can I forgive?" and obversely the second stanza wonders "How can I forgive / none of them?"³⁷ As adjacent closing and opening lines of the two stanzas, the three lines moreover create a new relationship, their "repetition with a difference" suggesting the whirling thoughts that occupy Mel who determines what to do next. The reflected lines show us Mel's self-reflections on the unsettled matter of revenge, which end where they began: "[t]hat night, it rained so hard."³⁸

Agbabi further queers time by refracting the tale through another narrative set in a third time but same place as "Unfinished Business," Robert Hamer's 1953 noir film *The Long Memory*.³⁹ Set in shabby post-war Gravesend, the film isn't interested in who murdered whom or why. Instead, it asks viewers to consider the futility of revenge. The protagonist, Phillip Davidson, comes to Gravesend seeking revenge on those whose lies convicted him of murder and

³⁵ Ibid., 87.

³⁶ Ibid., 86.

³⁷ Lee Clark Mitchell, *Mark My Words: Profiles of Punctuation in Modern Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 6; see also Agbabi, *Telling*, 86–87.

³⁸ Agbabi, 87.

³⁹ For a reading of the poem vis-à-vis Jonathan Nolan's story, "Memento Mori," and its film adaptation, *Memento* (2000), see Candace Barrington and Jonathan Hsy, "Remediated Verse: Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* and Patience Agbabi's 'Unfinished Business,'" *postmedieval* 6 (2105): 136–145.

sent him to prison for 12 years. He befriends an immigrant barmaid, Ilse, who provides the outsider's perspective. Her initial claim that "Perhaps it is not worth it to hurt people back" is first met by his repetition of her first three words, "Perhaps it is." Eventually, when he has the opportunity to exact his revenge, he realizes that "I just can't be bothered." Not only is revenge unsatisfying—"Funny, when you come to the point, revenge isn't worth it"—but extrajudicial revenge so resembles the legal forms of retribution that it throws into doubt the whole notion of institutional justice. The other characters think Davidson's narrative has yet more chapters, and they offer to help him get "justice" through the courts. Ilse rejects that trajectory and imagines a cyclical pattern to their lives: "It's not justice we need ... He doesn't need anything you can do for him. He only needs to be left alone to come back to life again." Davidson's story is unfinished, but revenge will no longer drive the narrative forward. In Agbabi's poem, Mel's "unfinished business" is unfinished, not abandoned. Readers are left not knowing if the speaker will take revenge or forgive. The two choices hang in suspension. One thing we are certain of, though, is that Mel's narrative is also set entirely outside the juridical realm. With no mention of police, courts, or jail, her story exists in the extra-judicial world of personal revenge.

Even as our own analysis of "Unfinished Business" is circular, the reading process is by no means complete. Interpretation entails perpetual re-reading, a continued return with a difference. We could take queer readings of this poem even further to explore the implications of Agbabi's decision to make a gendered turn away from a speaking Prudence—whose words take up most of Chaucer's prose narrative—to pivot toward the male Melibee figure, refigured in the voice of a fictive woman poet. Agbabi's narrative reorientation not only multiplies the reader's possible perspectives on the marital couple but also destabilizes our notions of who is conventionally considered the "household protector." The wronged spouse meditates on the assailant's right to live: "None of them, even Joe, has the right to live" becomes "Even Joe has the right to live."⁴⁰ The speaker's use of a familiar first name only ("Joe") and evident ambivalence at the prospect of taking Joe's life suggest that a deep bond exists between Mel and Joe. Whether this is an ongoing bond of friendship, kinship, or enmity—or something else that Mel cannot, or will not, disclose—a complex affective connection sustains Mel's delay in avenging the wrongs done to a wife and daughter.

The unsettled queerness of "Unfinished Business" could also be read in conjunction with the work's allusive cultural reorientations. Agbabi relocates Chaucer's *Melibee* to the gritty environment of Gravesend, with the poem's atmospheric

40 Agbabi, *Telling*, 86.

imagery of torrential rains, intimate interior spaces, and desolate parking lots evoking cinematic tropes of film noir. In a posting on a blog maintained throughout her composition of *Telling Tales*, Agbabi observed that the pervasive “noir” aesthetic of her *Melibee* adaptation was influenced by the 2003 BBC adaptation of *The Shipman's Tale* (entitled “The Sea Captain's Tale”), a retelling of the story that is set exclusively among characters living within the South Asian ethnic enclave of Gravesend.⁴¹ This TV adaptation by Indian screenwriter Avie Luthra explores both heteronormative and homosocial relationships in this Gravesend community, as well as the ethics of vengeance and destruction.⁴² Agbabi's blog posting reveals her gradual and nonlinear process of adapting *Melibee* by “veering toward” a media-crossing fusion of 1950s British noir and twenty-first-century Asian British noir—in addition to the film *Memento* by the British-American Nolan brothers.⁴³ The unsettled “veering toward” a completed poem that recirculates a range of cinematic and cultural influences befits the recursive loops, and the queer desires, that sustain “Unfinished Business.”

Queer Clerk's Tale: “I Go Back to May 1967”

If Agbabi is singular in her decision to update Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee*, she joins a host of translators and adaptors who have refashioned the story of Griselda that Chaucer adapted as *The Clerk's Tale*. In order to retell and comment on the perplexing, sad story of Griselda's persecution at her husband's hands, Chaucer relied upon at least two sources: Petrarch's *Historia Griseldis* in his *Epistolae Seniles* and an anonymous French translation, *Le Livre Griseldis*; these, in turn, find their source in the final story of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which can be traced back to folk legends.⁴⁴ Despite (or perhaps because of) the tale's focus on spousal abuse, the tale not only survives in most fifteenth-century manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*, but was a predictable selection when Chaucer's oeuvre was recrafted and modernized for nineteenth- and twentieth-century audiences. The tale even appears frequently in Chaucerian collections published

⁴¹ Agbabi, “Genre: Gravesend Noir ...,” *Telling Tales* (blog), November 20, 2010, <https://patienceagbabi.wordpress.com/2010/11/20/genre-gravesend-noir/>.

⁴² Kathleen Coyne Kelly, “The Color of Money: The BBC ‘Sea Captain's Tale,’” in *Chaucer on Screen: Absence, Presence, and Adapting the Canterbury Tales*, ed. Kathleen Coyne Kelly and Tison Pugh (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2016), 218–29.

⁴³ Agbabi, “Genre: Gravesend Noir”

⁴⁴ Tom Farrell and Amy Goodwin, “*The Clerk's Tale*,” in *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 101–67.

for children over the past two centuries. In varying degrees of bowdlerization and across an array of audiences, *The Clerk's Tale* has been among the most consistently anthologized of Chaucer's tales.⁴⁵ Throughout the centuries, generations of readers have wondered, "What on earth was Griselda thinking while Walter tormented her all those years? Why was she not like the 'noble wyves' which the *Envoy de Chaucer* exhorts to 'holdeth no silence' and to resist their husbands' abuses" (4.1183–1206)? Some, like Harry Bailey, have an easy answer: She was thinking about being a good, obedient wife, just the sort of model-wife he wished for his own "wyf at hoom" (4.1212d). Some, like the Clerk himself, have ignored that question and tried to re-orient the tale's focus by asking readers to see an allegory teaching us how "every wight, in his degree / Sholde be constant in adversitee" (4.1145–46), an allegory that just so happens to feature a cruel husband and beleaguered wife. Whatever their answer to Griselda's behavior, few readers have considered what Walter and Griselda's unnamed, un-speaking daughter was thinking. This unasked question becomes the premise for Agbabi's adaptation, "I Go Back to May 1967."⁴⁶

As we have seen with the way "Unfinished Business" revisits a Chaucerian tale through twentieth-century literary and cinematic tropes, the fictive narrator for "I Go Back to May 1967," Yejide Idowu-Clarke, insists we read her parents' marriage (as well as *The Clerk's Tale*) through the lens of Sharon Olds's similarly titled "I Go Back to May 1937."⁴⁷ By linking Idowu-Clarke's lyric retelling of *The Clerk's Tale* to Olds's poem set in 1937, fifty years in the past, Agbabi continues a second chain of appropriation that Olds's poem mediates with her echoes of Delmore Schwartz's "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" (1937), a short story that imagines his parents' doomed courtship as a disaster film he helplessly watches in horror. Agbabi first signals her appropriation with her poem's title, different from Olds's by only one digit, and with the epigraph "After Sharon Olds."⁴⁸ Agbabi strengthens the bonds between the two lyrics by reusing Olds's opening phrase "I see," two words that move the narrators from one temporal zone (the present) to another temporal zone (the past) without erasing the narrators' knowledge of the ensuing years. The parallels continue for another two words: "I see them standing," with "them" being the narratorial daughter's parents. With that similarity established, Agbabi then weaves together the details from the narrative of medieval Lombardy's Walter and Griselda, the lines describing Olds's

⁴⁵ Barrington, *American Chaucers*.

⁴⁶ Agbabi, *Telling*, 47–48.

⁴⁷ Russell Brickey, *Understanding Sharon Olds* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 6.

⁴⁸ Agbabi, *Telling*, 47.

inter-war California parents, and the most recent narrator's story of her parents set in another troubled time and place, post-independence Nigeria. This outright borrowing and the surprising parallels allow Agbabi to craft a queer, time-bending flow of transmission from trecento Italy to twenty-first-century Nigeria.

This queer flow of transmission, with Sharon Olds's time-bending narrative lyric as the most recent, provides a potent catalyst for Agbabi's transformation of the Chaucerian Clerk's extended account of a story "which that I / Learned at Padowe of a worthy clerk" (4.26–27) into a tight lyric voicing the daughter's perspective of family trauma. With the title and the opening words, Idowu-Clarke claims to witness what should be impossible to witness: the moment her parents meet for the first time. Its temporal doubling allows her to witness her own parents' courtship with a first-person fabrication based on first-hand experiences. Those experiences were not based on what the narrator could have physically encountered in 1997, but on how those past events irreversibly shaped (and continue to shape) her present. This feat of temporal displacement and imaginative reconstruction gives voice to a figure in *The Clerk's Tale* hitherto kept silent, Griselda's daughter. In Agbabi's version, Idowu-Clarke is made both daughter and the narrating "Clerk of Oxenford" (4.1), in keeping with Olds's precedent. This newly-voiced narrator uses borrowed material to craft her deeply invested yet highly mediated perspective in order to expose "patriarchal abuse, women's solidarity, [and] family dysfunction."⁴⁹

Though Agbabi's fictive poet adopts Olds's practice of examining and re-examining the the vestiges of memory and the "ultimate effect these memories have on the adult speaker," Idowu-Clarke twists Olds's narratorial practice.⁵⁰ Whereas Olds's persona is interested in how past traumas affect the adult child, Agbabi's narrator is concerned with the mother's trauma, a vestige of the story's medieval source. The Nigerian daughter, watching from the advantage of her own adulthood, knows what her parents seem not to recognize: the bride is "not a bad woman, / he is not a good man," a sly resetting of Olds's lines—"she's the wrong woman, / he's the wrong man"⁵¹—in which the couple are wrong for each other, but not themselves necessarily bad. In Agbabi's account, the marriage is bad because he's a bad man, and the mother is the one who needs to be (but is not being) warned away from the impending disaster, as indicated by her direct address to the mother: "*you* are not a bad woman" (our emphasis). Though she cannot undo the violence the father inflicts on his wife, the

⁴⁹ Brickey, *Understanding Sharon Olds*, 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵¹ Agbabi, *Telling*, 47; Sharon Olds, *The Gold Cell* (New York: NY: Knopf, 1987), 23.

daughter repeats it in a verse narrative, and so prevents another act of violence: forgetting the unwarranted “trial” suffered by the mother.⁵²

Olds also provides a model for rethinking the narrator’s relationship to the lyric’s events and her complicity. Instead of Chaucer’s learned, disinterested male tale-teller, Agbabi introduces a highly educated daughter to bear witness to the family’s dysfunction. Idowu-Clarke takes us to the place and time of the injury. Witnessing the trauma of her parents’ marriage, she has neither the ability nor the desire to undo it, for her own existence depends upon the familial trauma. Indeed, the shape of her childhood and her adult life is determined by her father’s singular, violent stroke. When he claims his wife’s illiteracy makes her an unfit mother and threatens his authority, everything shifts, and the narrator presents herself as a beneficiary of his actions. Her exile from Oga’s household grants her an education at “the best schools in the country,”⁵³ an education evidenced by the poem itself. In complete sentences with standard word order and standard vocabulary, the narrative creates a persona whose voice we can imagine as speaking with a carefully mastered received pronunciation. Her mother’s trauma, therefore, was the means by which she became well-educated and ended up in the metropole. And though she might want to reach back to say “Stop,” she knows that her own existence depends on her mother’s suffering. Witnessing the moment when a catastrophe could be headed off, she offers to deploy her education to tell her mother’s tale, mirroring her initial “I see” with “I will bear witness.”⁵⁴

Agbabi also takes advantage of Olds’s pattern of identifying “emotional correlates” between her personal grievances and such collective tragedies as the Holocaust.⁵⁵ A similar comparison between grand upheavals and the narrator’s personal and familial traumas in Idowu-Clarke’s tale is suggested by the titular date, “May 1967.” In that month, newly independent Nigeria was on the brink of civil war between the military government and the Biafran secessionist movement. Noted for its brutality, the civil war became known in the West for its high rates of child starvation when Nigeria blocked food shipments to rebel areas. Without directly invoking the cruel civil war, the poem’s geographical and temporal setting (as well as its links to Olds) invites us to consider the ways national and familial cruelty feed on one another. Furthermore, that local reverberation is undergirded by the destructive legacy of colonialism, which divested Nigerians of their birthright in exchange for a promised access

⁵² Agbabi, *Telling*, 47.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Agbabi, *Telling*, 47–48.

⁵⁵ Brickey, *Understanding Sharon Olds*, 7.

to the West's material wealth, for which Oga's Cadillac provides a crass synecdoche. With these elements of Nigeria's postcolonial legacy—and without withdrawing Oga's responsibility—Agbabi frames Yejide Idowu-Clarke's family in terms of the many African women whose lives were turned upside down by local forms of patriarchy as well as by Great Britain's colonial enterprise. By imagining her narrator as a scholar who shuttles between Oxford and Lagos, Agbabi considers the tension between seeing emigration to the metropole as a dislocation and as an opportunity.

Ultimately, Agbabi's recreation of Walter's story and Griselda's story through the eyes of their daughter lets us divert our eyes from the “sensational spectacle that concentrates intense affectivity” on the mother's trauma⁵⁶ and onto the queer discomfort of the family's script.⁵⁷ Through her perspective, we are able to see anew that Walter's efforts to assert his patriarchal authority undermines the heteronormative nature providing the foundation of that authority. When the daughter is returned to her father's household, her mother would have been a stranger, and the ways of the household would not have been familiar to her. Instead, she would have re-entered and witnessed a childless household, apparently devoid of reproductive sexual relations. In the place of heteronormative formations would be incestuous formations created by Walter's compulsion to assert his patriarchal authority. Because Walter's sister (unnecessarily) becomes the mother of Walter and Griselda's children, and because he stages his marriage (albeit fake) to his daughter, he entangles himself in incestuous formations, all of which become most apparent when the family reunion is reconsidered from the daughter's perspective. Agbabi's retelling allows us to rethink Walter as a patriarch undone by his own excessive masculinity, a man whose zealous assertion of his dominance allows him to slip into becoming what he worked so hard not to be.

Queer *Man of Law's Tale*: “Joined-Up Writing”

In an essay entitled “Queering Sonnets: Sexuality and Transnational Identity in the Poetry of Patience Agbabi,” Manuela Coppola examines Agbabi's pre-*Telling Tales* poetic oeuvre through an intertwining of queer diaspora and intersectional

56 Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 217.

57 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 144–51.

Black cultural studies. Coppola explores how Agbabi's poetry repurposes the gendered and cultural norms of the European medieval sonnet form—with its presumed male speaker and objectified blonde muse—to craft new poetic configurations of queer desire among Black women; and “by destabilizing safe assumptions about literary canons, race, sex and gender, Agbabi *queers* the sonnet form by challenging and reworking its conventions.”⁵⁸ In the context of the queer crown of sonnets of “Joined Up Writing” in *Telling Tales*, Agbabi creates space for unsettled desires among women—in addition to situating these desires within a nonlinear recursive time of medievalism.

“Joined-Up Writing” most noticeably registers as a queer sonnet form through Agbabi's layers of gendered and racialized voicing. The poem is authored by a fictional female poet who herself has immigrated from Zimbabwe, and her poem is attributed to a fictive white British female speaker; the layering of voices in the sonnet sequence exposes the implicit and explicit forms of racism and queer desire that disturbingly structure British xenophobia. Agbabi's fictive narrator is “Memory Anesu Sergeant,” whose author biography states that she is a barrister by profession who “[o]riginates from Zimbabwe” and “began writing seriously during maternity leave” and has published a book of poetry and “learns her poems off by heart and reads regularly on BBC Radio 4.”⁵⁹ Such a fictionalized biography obliquely resonates with Agbabi's own experience as an established figure on the performance poetry circuit who incorporates her particular bicultural “English and Nigerian upbringing, in England and in Wales” into her work, exhibiting throughout her artistic and professional endeavors a “passion” to “counter [the] hegemony” of a field dominated by white men.⁶⁰

While Chaucer's narrative is composed in rhyme royal stanzas, Agbabi crafts a crown of sonnets, with the final line in each stanza (each a complete sonnet) slightly reshaped to become the first line of the subsequent stanza. Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* has been richly assessed for its complex treatment of racial and religious difference on two concurrent geocultural fronts (Muslim Syria and pagan Britain, respectively), and its protagonist Custance—a noble Christian from Rome who is both virtuous and fair (in all senses of the word)—finds herself rejected by a foreign mother-in-law figure in both spaces. Cord J. Whitaker and Shyama Rajendran have explored how Chaucer's story invites modern readers to question its intertwining of medieval racial and linguistic ideologies, and

⁵⁸ Coppola, “Queering Sonnets,” 372 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁹ Agbabi, *Telling*, 119.

⁶⁰ Agbabi, “Stories in Stanza'd English,” 3.

they divergently demonstrate medieval modes of rhetorical “othering” of entire groups of people along the lines of religion and geography.⁶¹ In contemporary terms, Agbabi not only grapples with bodies in motion—the migratory positionalities of the diasporic subject—but she also exposes what intersectional Black feminists have called “misogynoir,” a term initially coined by queer Black feminist Moya Bailey that conjoins “misogyny” with “noir” (the French term for “black”) in order to name the interlocking social systems of race and gender that harm Black women in particular.⁶² The term “misogynoir” has since garnered widespread use throughout discussions of race and gender in British contexts as well.⁶³

Agbabi's poem reinvents Custance as Constance, an immigrant from Zimbabwe who settles in Britain, yet the story of Constance and her husband Ollie is told through the voice of Constance's white mother-in-law speaking in a Northern (Geordie) variety of British English. Elsewhere in her work, Agbabi characterizes this mother-in-law speaker as “a person ... between classes [who] reacted with jealousy and racism when her son took a Zimbabwean wife.”⁶⁴ Agbabi's unnamed narrator characterizes her African immigrant daughter-in-law, obliquely yet disapprovingly, as Black: “Constance was coloured, brown, / a name so long you'd sweat to break it down.”⁶⁵ The disruptive conjunction of the phrase “coloured, brown,” followed by the phrase “break it down” (with a reference to some lengthy but undisclosed “foreign” name) anticipates the emotional “breakdown” that the narrator invokes in the opening line of the next stanza. In this poem, Constance's “coloured, brown” body and her “foreign” name and origins effectively break down closed systems of white British insularity. The mother-in-law prefaces her remarks about Constance's Blackness by unconvincingly disclaiming her own racism: “Not that I'm prejudiced, some of my best/friends are foreign.”⁶⁶ Nonetheless, the poetic speaker's repeated references to “Africa”—rather than naming the specific country of Constance's origin—sug-

61 Cord J. Whitaker, “Race and Racism in the *Man of Law's Tale*,” in *The Open Access Companion to The Canterbury Tales*; Shyama Rajendran, “Undoing ‘the Vernacular’: Dismantling Structures of Raciolinguistic Supremacy,” *Literature Compass* 16, no. 9–10 (September–October 2019): 1–13.

62 Moya Bailey and Trudy, “On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 762–768.

63 Eliza Anyangwe, “Misogynoir: Where Racism and Sexism Meet,” *The Guardian*, October 5, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/oct/05/what-is-misogynoir>.

64 Agbabi, “Stories in Stanza'd English,” 5.

65 Agbabi, *Telling*, 22.

66 Ibid.

gest the narrator's inability to fathom Black Africans as anything other than monolithically foreign.

The racially evasive terminology that this mother-in-law employs deserves closer attention precisely for its painstaking avoidance of the term "Black" and proliferation of awkward circumlocutions. The conspicuously roundabout descriptors of "colored, brown" and "foreign" signal the mother-in-law's fear of openly uttering the word "Black"—her tightly-controlled rhetoric seeking to disavow, or disguise, the reality of anti-Black racism and misogynoir. The speaker's rhetorical diversions take on an especially resonant meaning due to the formal qualities of Agbabi's crown of sonnets. Its circular and interlacing structure takes the reader back to the beginning of the poem, endlessly circling around the emotional heart of this story: the mother-in-law's envy of Constance, who is "replacing" the mother, the proper object of her own son's devotion. By the end of the poem, the reader realizes the speaker has been left behind in Britain while Ollie and Constance have returned to her homeland abroad. Through geospatial and temporal movements and rhetorical distancing devices, Agbabi showcases how poetic adaptations effect racial reorientations as well as sociopolitical disorientations.

Agbabi's queer sonnets, when taken as a whole, enact a trenchant political critique. "Joined-Up Writing" not only attests to hostility toward, and rejection of, Black and immigrant women; the poem also reveals the harms that prejudice enacts upon British xenophobes in turn. The unnamed mother-in-law speaker in this poem embodies the corruptive effects of maintaining closed ideas of who properly "counts" as British, and Agbabi reveals how white resentment can coincide with undisclosed or inexpressible queer envy. The apparent mysteries of the mother-in-law's true desires and prejudices are thematized by the writerly career of her beloved son. In the opening lines of the poem, the speaker disjointedly and recursively reveals that Ollie is a famous author of detective fiction: "My son's a writer, aye ... Detective novels ... I wronged my laddie, Ollie, Oliver,/Oliver Robson. Have you heard of him?"⁶⁷ Through these opening gestures to the mystery novel and an obliquely confessed crime, Agbabi slyly suggests how a submergèd genre of British noir coincides with this poem's open indictment of misogynoir. Agbabi constructs the crown of sonnets in order to invite the reader to re-read the entire work from the beginning and layer their interpretations of the story in the process. The circular form of the poem conveys the suspended animation and lack of progress associated with racism and misogyny, and it

67 Agbabi, *Telling*, 21.

challenges the reader to carefully consider any initial sympathy the poetic speaker might have garnered.

Inconclusion

We close this essay not with a conclusion but with an “inconclusion,” acknowledging how all readings of texts are never complete and always open to recursive layering. The circular and recursive form of Agbabi's poetic adaptations showcases the queer time of medievalism and the queer form of adaptation. Across all three poems, women's vulnerability never overshadows women's strength. The darkly British “Asian noir” that obliquely informs Agbabi's “Unfinished Business” resonates with a distinctively British form of misogynoir in “Joined-Up Writing”; and bridging these two poems, “I Go Back to 1967” invites us both to consider the ways lyric voices can investigate public roles and transgress racial polarities, and to attend to queerly time-bending cultural flows of literary influence, imitation, and allusion. Each poem invites the reader to revisit their initial assumptions about the gendered positions or desires of fictive characters and to reconsider their own reactions to the texts through attentive acts of reflection and re-reading. Remixing Chaucerian tales with influences from contemporary screen narratives, from poetic interlocutors across disparate moments in time, and from “noir” genres, Agbabi's queer reconfigurations of gender, racial, and national positionings perpetually reorient and challenge their audiences.

