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## Conversations: Candace Barrington Interviews Patience Agbabi, author of *Telling Tales*

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## Conversations: Candace Barrington Interviews Patience Agbabi, author of *Telling Tales*

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### Abstract

Candace Barrington interviews Patience Agbabi about her relationship to Geoffrey Chaucer and his *Canterbury Tales*.

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(photo courtesy of Candace Barrington)

**We know you've discussed this elsewhere, but for our audience would you mind discussing what drew you to the *Canterbury Tales* and its framing device? Do/did you have any ambivalence about linking your work so tightly to Chaucer's?**

The first time I was drawn to the *Canterbury Tales* was at school, studying A-Level English Literature. My teacher read 'The General Prologue' out loud whilst we followed it on the page. I was thrilled by the sound and look of Middle English, the earthiness of it, the mellifluous feminine rhymes. And the delicious Chaucerian irony. I hadn't realized until then that serious literature could also be humorous. Our teacher had already explained the framing device to make it more accessible to us, but it was quite another thing to experience it, to have the build-up in those famous opening lines, then to meet each of the pilgrims, some of whom were so clearly depicted I imagined them walking into the classroom fully formed.

A few weeks later, we were set the homework task of creating our own character portrait, in iambic pentameter and using Chaucerian irony. That was the catalyst I needed. Encouraged by a top mark, I went on to write my own 'General Prologue to the Colwyn Bay Tales', followed by a couple

of tales. That in-depth creative engagement gave me closeness to Chaucer's work but at that stage, I had only read 'The General Prologue' and a couple of tales.

At university, I did a Chaucer and/or Langland paper and read all the tales except the prose ones. But when, years later, I decided to write my own version, I'd conveniently forgotten the violence, misogyny, queerphobia, antisemitism etc. in the original text.

However, by that stage, I had formed the Medieval-Renaissance Women's Drinking Society and had some invaluable advice from Jane Draycott, translator of the medieval dream poem, *Pearl*. She advised me to decide where I might position myself in relation to the original: would I be behind it, beside it, in front of it or even inside it? I realized I could at times be very close to it and at others, I could be more distanced. I had no problem with linking my work to Chaucer's original. 600 years had passed since its inception and I was in love with his prosody, his characters, his range of genres. Also, I wanted to encourage others to read his work, warts and all. And as I was writing, I deliberately took several risks by giving voice to racist or sexist characters who were diametrically opposed to my own politics, though I drew the line at queerphobia and antisemitism.

**We've noticed that, in many ways, *Telling Tales* is as much about its relationship to London as its relationship to the *Canterbury Tales*. For instance, when students read/study *Telling Tales*, they realize they need to conduct background research on the various neighborhoods in order to catch all that's happening in the tale. Does that observation feel true to you? If so, could you discuss the importance of geography in *Telling Tales*?**

Yes, geography is important, and an understanding of a setting will enhance the reading of a tale though prosody, voice, character and plot are equally important. I didn't realise how London-centric my vision was until I embarked upon this project.

As the original drama takes place on the London-Canterbury route, I framed my version as a poetry slam taking place on a Routemaster bus travelling a similar route. As I chose not to have any description or interaction between tales, I wanted to emphasize place in the fragment sections and the tales themselves. I followed the received order of the ten fragments, giving them the place names: Old Kent Road, Shooter's Hill, Dartford, Stone, Gravesend, Strood, Rochester, Sittingbourne, Harbledown and Canterbury. Greenwich and Deptford are mentioned in Chaucer's original, but I didn't include them because they are too close to one another geographically and wouldn't symbolize sufficient movement along the route. The Pilgrims Way does not go through Gravesend but I took that detour because I live there and wanted it to feature. The final four place names are mentioned in the original text. So in terms of the *route*, London doesn't feature predominantly.

However, several of the tales are set in London. I was born a Londoner, lived there for many years and have often used it as a setting for my poems across collections. I particularly wanted to reference London in the first fragment, to further highlight the fact that the Routemaster bus was passing through the capital. In my seriously truncated version of the 'Knight's Tale', 'Emily', London serves as the film-noir background to a drama that takes place entirely in Emily's head. I envisaged my version of the 'Miller's Tale' taking place in Deptford, referencing the place names 'Southwark' and 'Greenwich' within the text. The line 'We got The Knowledge like black cabs' celebrates the iconic

London taxicabs, and *The Knowledge* is the complex exam the drivers must take in order to get their licence. ‘Roving Mic’ my ‘Cook’s Tale’ uses lots of city references.

I also reference London in several tales across the book, often to emphasize social class. My Wife of Bafa commutes between London and Lagos due to her monetary wealth; my working-class Summoner speaks Cockney rhyming slang, depicting a wealthy part of North London ‘where the Newtons is’, an obscure reference to Isaac Newton appearing on a £50 note. My ‘Tale of Sir Thopas’ has Sir Oliphant recast as Da Elephant, a middle-class grime artist from Elephant and Castle, a gritty inner-city area in southeast London which his opponent, Sir Topaz, uses against him in the final line: ‘Elephant, fuck off back to your Castle...’

But I was also careful to have the tales appear ‘every shire’s end’ and beyond. There’s a tale set in Gravesend, one set in Canterbury; many other places in the UK like Glastonbury, Newcastle, North Wales, Edinburgh; and abroad: Denmark, Nigeria, Ghana, Russia. Many of Chaucer’s tales had international roots and I wanted to reflect that.

**One reason medievalists like engaging with you and your work is because you have swum in our waters and you understand our interests. Though the next question may seem a bit wonkish, we suspect that you might have something to say on it. A topic of perennial interest in Reception Studies is the interplay between “intertextuality” and “retelling.” That is, how much did you rely on Chaucer’s text? How much signaling did you feel was required? How much of the signaling was a result of being the Canterbury Poet Laureate and therefore “part of the job”?**

I had complete free rein as Canterbury Laureate. One of the requirements of the job was to write some poems that in some way ‘related to Canterbury’ but they had no idea I was a Chaucer aficionado when they hired me. And the writing of *Telling Tales* extended well beyond the end of the laureateship.

I definitely relied heavily on Chaucer’s text as my primary inspirations were working with his prosody and his use of the vernacular. Before writing each version, I read Chaucer’s original first, then turned to several other sources, e.g. the BBC’s six TV adaptations (BBC One 2003); ‘The Rap Canterbury Tales’ by Canadian rapper Baba Brinkman (2004); the animated versions by Jonathan Myerson (1998). Some poems directly quoted the original, especially in the tales that have longer prologues, thus enabling a character to come to life through their speech and actions. For example, my Wife of Bafa’s description of her husbands (‘Three were good and two were bad./The first three were old and rich’) is a close echo of the original (‘As thre of hem were goode, and two were badde. The thre were goode men, and riche, and olde’). My Pardoner, recast as a motivational speaker, uses the same Latin refrain as Chaucer’s original, ‘*Radix malorum est cupiditas*’ to lend ‘gravitas’ to his speech but also to send a strong intertextual signal to the reader.

But as mentioned previously, I also had the freedom to take liberties and go off at a tangent from Chaucer’s original in the spirit of retelling. My ‘Squire’s Tale’, ‘Fine Lines’, plays with the imagery from the unfinished text but recreates a story of lost love through the prism of tattoos. The ‘Physician’s Tale’ was a supreme challenge: how to depict an honour killing? After many attempts, I came up with a collaged, polyvocal style, telling the story from four different perspectives within one continuous

text in the voices of the honour killer's wife, the honour killer, a newspaper headline, and my own authorial comment.

The prose tales posed a different challenge: how could I render them into poetry and make them engaging? I translated the moral dilemma at the heart of 'The Tale of Melibee' into a film noir specular poem with an unreliable narrator. That version, 'Unfinished Business', is also a play on Chaucer's original, unfinished text. Whereas the didacticism of the 'Parson's Tale' fitted well with Old Skool rap, and whilst the opening of the tale directly echoes the rap genre mantra *and* Chaucer 'I'm keepin it real, no rum, ram, ruf,' my lively depiction of the Seven Deadly Sins, following the exact order of appearance in the prose, came more from Langland than Chaucer!

**What do you make of the flourishing of interest in the Wife of Bath (Zadie Smith's *Wife of Willesden*, Carolyn Bergvall's *Alisoun*, as well as Marion Turner's *The Wife of Bath: A Biography*)?**

Once you've met the Wife of Bath, you never forget her. She reenters your consciousness in waves, and she takes over your creative psyche. She's by far the most popular of all of Chaucer's characters, the most revived and revered. She resonates across time and space. Maybe the growing amount of misogyny on the internet has inspired writers to engage with the character at this particular epoch. But also, the internet enables us to engage with a broader range of versions and heightens her profile. Marion Turner said she was amazed no one had thought of writing a biography of The Wife of Bath before.

I've created two versions of her. The first appeared in my second collection, *Transformatrix*, (2000) focusing on the tale of her five husbands. The second fuller version appears in *Telling Tales* (2014) and includes the Tale of the Loathly Lady. That's a metaphor for the way in which a fictional character can multiply their incarnations, inspiring other writers to reinvent a character in their own epoch and cultural background.

**Almost everyone we know uses some or all of *Telling Tales* when they teach the *Canterbury Tales*. Have you been surprised by the ways *Telling Tales* has been brought into the classroom?**

I would say more inspired than surprised. One of my aims when writing the book was to encourage readers to enjoy *Telling Tales* then engage with or revisit Chaucer's original text. So I'm delighted the book is being used alongside Chaucer in schools and universities, in the UK and USA. And I'm impressed with some of the ingenious ways that teachers and lecturers have engaged the students. From inspiring them to write their own versions of tales, a brilliant way of immersing them in the text and taking ownership of it (just as my English teacher encouraged us to write our own character portrait), to producing one of my poems as a short film: [Sharps an Flats \(UGA Remix\) | Cynthia Turner Camp](#) (Camp 2015), inspired by both Chaucer's original text and multimedia versions. It seems befitting that my work can speak across both the Atlantic and multiple art forms in this digital age.

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