

Erotic Medievalisms

Medieval Pleasures Empowering Marginalized People

Elan Justice Pavlinich

First published 2023

ISBN: 978-1-032-23205-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-45874-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-27854-2 (ebk)

Chapter 3

The Cunning Linguist of Agbabi's "The Kiss"

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003278542-4



ROUTLEDGE

Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

NEW YORK AND LONDON

3 The Cunning Linguist of Agbabi's "The Kiss"

Patience Agbabi is a contemporary poet from London known for sophisticated, sexually explicit meters. For example, the bold content of one early poem, "Miss De Meanour," distracted some audiences from what Agbabi explains is "actually a sestina, [a] form of French poetry that's incredibly hard to write. But people seem only to see what they want to see."¹ Her style invites audiences to enjoy human sexualities elegantly coupled with complex poetic forms. In 2009 she was named the Canterbury poet laureate, for which she received an Arts Council Grant to write a full-length collection based on Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.² Subsequently, her 2014 collection, *Telling Tales*, is a postmodern slam-poetry remix of Chaucer's groundbreaking Middle English text. Set on a Routemaster bus, Agbabi's foray into medievalism features diverse characters sharing stories that capture their individual standpoints, much like the pilgrims in Chaucer's frame narrative. Among these diverse poems, "The Kiss" is a personal narrative about the speaker's sexual gratification, her three lovers, and a series of events culminating in cheeky consequences. I argue that the oral sex enjoyed by the narrator of Agbabi's "The Kiss," cunnilingus, disrupts male-dominated literary conventions—erotic poetic innovations that align with an English literary tradition traceable to *The Canterbury Tales*.

Agbabi's "The Kiss" is based on Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*, the second narrative in *The Canterbury Tales*, written near the end of the fourteenth century. According to the frame narrative in which *The Miller's Tale* is situated, *The Canterbury Tales*' pilgrims participate in a storytelling competition while traveling to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. One of the pilgrims, Robin, the miller, drunkenly relates a convoluted series of events that revolve around three men seeking carnal pleasure with the same woman, Alisoun. Deceptions escalate and intersect resulting in Absolon kissing Alisoun's bottom and later penetrating Nicholas's ass with a hot poker. Then, John, Alisoun's husband, is injured and exposed to the ridicule of his community. Alisoun, however, does not experience the same reversal of fortune: she enjoys sex with Nicholas, receives a kiss from Absolon, and escapes John's overbearing nature. Having encountered

medievalisms inspired by Chaucer's poetry, Agbabi notes, "I was aware these versions were by men, and that fact spurred me on with a passion to counter that hegemony."³ And so, in "The Kiss," Robyn Miller, Agbabi's narrator, reshapes the power dynamics of *The Miller's Tale* while teasing audiences with metaphorical representations of a special kind of kiss: cunnilingus, oral sex performed on a vulva. Although Agbabi uses the same characters named in *The Miller's Tale*, she redistributes narrative control to the only woman in Chaucer's cast, Alisoun—now named Robyn Miller in Agbabi's retelling. Agbabi recuperates this central woman from a sexual object commodified between men in *The Miller's Tale* to the authorial voice wielding power over men in "The Kiss." Although the plot is nearly identical to Chaucer's, Agbabi literalizes sexual acts that are only figurative in *The Miller's Tale* and some of the Old French fabliaux—generic literary conventions in which both *The Miller's Tale* and "The Kiss" participate.

In "Prologue (Grime Mix)" and "The Kiss," two of Agbabi's speakers meditate on kissing as an intimate, sometimes erotic act, that shifts authorial control to women. Further, erotic encounters in "The Kiss" privilege women's pleasure and literary production. This chapter analyzes Patience Agbabi's "The Kiss," Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*, and the Old French fabliaux conventions that inform both texts. I argue that Agbabi situates her medievalism, *Telling Tales*, within a traditional, patrilineal heritage of canonical English figures, such as Chaucer, to challenge the homosocial literary networks that privilege men's perspectives. Ultimately, Agbabi employs kissing as acts of oral stimulation that empower women's voices.

Literary Conventions and English Innovations

Both Chaucer and Agbabi are participating in Old French fabliaux conventions. One hundred and fifty-three fabliaux from thirteenth- and fourteenth-century north France survive. Written in Old French octosyllabic couplets, the narratives typically feature working-class characters and a clever twist involving love, sex, money, or treachery; however, fabliaux are so diverse that some critics denounce attempts to limit the genre, favoring Joseph Bédier's broad definition: *contes à rire en vers* (stories in verse for laughter).⁴ Some scholars interpret fabliaux as a literary genre that deliberately contrasts with the noble *fin'amor* of popular medieval romances. *Fin'amor*, fine love, is an ideal of proper conduct between lovers, promoted by literary conventions that privilege heteronormative romantic relationships between noble men and women.⁵ These narratives were promoted among twelfth-century troubadours, performers who composed lyric poetry in Provençal in an early French dialect now identified as Occitan.⁶ *Fin'amor*, as described in the introduction, consists of "sensual longing, verbal love games, separations, frustrated sexual expectations, postponed physical union, temporary satisfactions and stolen looks or kisses, [and] fear of competing lovers."⁷ Later medieval England, according to Larry D.

Benson, looked to French culture, including *fin'amor*, to construct English chivalric virtues, and this ideology informed courtly romances and handbooks instructing proper conduct.⁸ But contrary to the ideals of *fin'amor*, some fabliaux promote social mobility, and thus may have appealed to the rising middle class of Chaucer's day.⁹ Evidently, Chaucer himself draws inspiration from French fabliaux for *The Miller's Tale* (and *The Reeve's Tale*), to undermine the traditional social hierarchy outlined in the opening structure of *The General Prologue*.

Nevertheless, despite challenges to social hierarchies, the Old French fabliaux and Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* are mostly androcentric—privileging men's perspectives and homosocial relationships among men.¹⁰ Carolyn Dinshaw explains that “literary activity has a gendered structure, a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying—allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating—with the masculine.”¹¹ Dinshaw identifies a “timeless brotherhood of authors” which she traces from Adam, the first human to use language and “inventor of names” (Genesis 2:19) to Chaucer's scribe, “Adam Sciveyn.”¹² Homosocial bonds inform content as well. For example, in *The Miller's Tale*, although Alisoun emerges as the only character unscathed by fabliaux shenanigans, she is treated as a commodity representing exchanges of power between men.¹³ For that matter, Chaucer's frame narrative is preoccupied with a storytelling competition between men: Knight, Miller, Monk, and Reeve grapple for dominance in the first fragment. This androcentrism is not particular to *The Canterbury Tales*.

Male privilege is encoded within literary traditions that extend beyond texts' and authors' immediate social contexts, crossing historical periods and cultures to create pervasive, seemingly monolithic ideologies. For example, Theresa Earenfight observes androcentric influences on medieval social structures and, later, scholarly approaches to the Middle Ages:

The masculinist standpoint of privileged men ... led them to exclude women from inquiry, to deny them epistemic authority, and to denigrate the feminine cognitive styles and modes of knowledge. They produced narratives that represented women as inferior, deviant, or significant only in the ways that they serve male interests and produce knowledge that reinforces gender hierarchies.¹⁴

Women, and women's perspectives, were generally excluded from institutions of authorized knowledge, including both early literary canons and universities that perpetuate androcentric epistemologies. Modern institutions maintain these homosocial literary networks by authorizing masculine hermeneutics and epistemologies, founded on traditional canons that revere figures such as Chaucer as the “Father of English Poetry.” John Dryden first conferred this honorary title on Chaucer in 1700 because, “From Chaucer the Purity of the English Tongue began,” despite Middle

English lacking the standardization that developed during the early modern period.¹⁵ Nevertheless, institutionalized canons and curricula have generally constructed Chaucer as this patriarchal figure who represents a standard for literature, limiting the English literary heritage and blunting the radical nature of Chaucer's poetic innovations within the general cultural memory. "Father Chaucer" is a title that sanitizes his image; the individual is rendered an abstract origin for a monolithic English canon, in accordance with Michel Foucault's understanding of the author as an organizational category.¹⁶ Identifying Chaucer as a patriarchal figure homologizes him and his literary contributions to the heteronormative regime of reproduction within narrow homosocial contexts. Recent scholarship, however, has developed a different approach. Glenn Burger encourages "reading a moment of new beginning in the Canterbury project, not retrospectively through the lens of 'Father Chaucer' and the modernity he originates, but *prospectively* through the lens of contemporary queer desire unleashed in pornography."¹⁷ Erotic encounters incite subversive hermeneutics in both the Chaucerian corpus and its afterlives.

Agbabi's metaphorical representation of cunnilingus in "The Kiss" disrupts androcentric, male-dominated literary conventions by privileging one woman's erotic pleasures and poetic voice. Because Agbabi's medievalism, *Telling Tales*, is the focus of this chapter, I begin with a close reading of "The Kiss." Then, Agbabi's poetic innovations are read in relation to her medieval influences, including *The Miller's Tale*, homosocial exchanges in the opening fragment of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the patriarchal lineage of both a "traditional" early English literary canon and androcentric fabliaux conventions. In conclusion, Agbabi extends the narrative game of *The Canterbury Tales* into postmodern contexts by reviving Chaucerian rhetorical strategies, multiplying languages, and exposing mechanisms of power.

Multivalent Mouths, Twisting Tongues

Agbabi employs cunnilingus as a sex act that informs the subject of her subversive poetry; she positions one woman's pleasure as a disruption to the male-dominated literary conventions in which her medievalism is situated. The narrator of Agbabi's "The Kiss," Robyn, identifies three sexual partners: John, Nick, and Abs, who she ranks based on their abilities to satisfy. Describing her erotic encounters, Robyn employs six separate references to kissing, inciting audiences to assume a traditional kiss that is performed by pressing two sets of lips together. She complicates this assumption by encoding her preferred kiss in French, English, Latin, and Braille, culminating in a multilingual representation of cunnilingus.

First, Robyn implies that cunnilingus is her preferred "kiss" by establishing a hierarchy whereby she ranks her pleasure as it corresponds to her lovers' skills and abilities. She compares her three partners, including her

husband, John; her French lover, Nick; and her drug-dealing muscle-stud, Abs. Out of these three men:

only one can kiss the kiss.
 What is it makes my bottle fizz?
 Je ne sais quoi my arse, hear this:
 What's in a kiss? I'll kiss an tell.¹⁸

(38–41)

Robyn flouts hackneyed French phrases, such as “je ne sais quoi,” which implies a feigned demure approach to sexuality, claiming instead that she will inform audiences about the details of the type of kiss she most enjoys. Promising to “kiss an tell” suggests that actions performed by the lips will be put into language, drawing attention to the multiple functions of the mouth as an orifice of communication, revelation, and gratification. But her explanation is not explicit; instead, she combines multiple languages that incite audiences to translate and infer the type of kiss she enjoys most.

Robyn's preferred kiss is cunnilingus, which she encodes through a series of linguistic registers including French, English, Latin, and Braille. Attributing “the kiss” to her favorite lover, Nick, she describes, “my lover's ‘baiser’, ‘fuck’ in braille” (43). In French, *baiser* (pronounced /beze/) means both “a kiss” and “to fuck.”¹⁹ Etymological sources reveal that *baiser* originally meant to kiss, but had morphed by the twelfth century to the more vulgar denotation.²⁰ Employing the multivalent French *baiser*, Robyn implies that she prefers something more exhilarating than “a kiss” in the traditional sense. English-speaking audiences with limited understanding of French, and few textual clues to indicate that the speaker has changed languages (such as italicized words), may pronounce the French *baiser* as the English “baser” (pronounced /beiser/), meaning “situated lower.”²¹ Thus Robyn employs an aural register that imbues the word with multivalence.

In fact, the English “baser” is borrowed from the French *baisser* (pronounced /bese/), meaning “to go down,” which bears some significance in the context of Agbabi's poem.²² Her “lover's ba[i]ser” suggests that he is lower in the social hierarchy, and that her “lover's ba[i]ser [kiss]” is anatomically lower on her body, which suggests cunnilingus, as exemplified by the spatial orientations in the accompanying image (Figure 3.1).

The dual languages employed by Robyn suggest that Nick is performing a French kiss, meaning that his mouth is open and his tongue is extended, penetrating as he kisses her. Robyn's metaphorical representation of her preferred kiss ties English and French tongues together, resulting in a figurative French kiss between two vernacular tongues—perhaps alluding to *langue* as a French homonym meaning both tongue and language.²³ Of course, French and English tongues share significant medieval historical intersections: French words take root more pervasively in the English language during the phase following the Norman Conquest of 1066, after which



Figure 3.1 A woman receives oral sex, positioning herself over and above the man who pleasures her, visually privileging her sexual authority and gratification. Manu, CC BY 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

Anglo-Norman was the dominant language for a time in medieval England. By code-switching from French to English while maintaining dual meanings in both linguistic traditions, plus their cultural associations, Agbabi loads a single word, *baiser*, with multivalence. Despite these multifarious meanings and interpretations, this wordplay coalesces into a singular meaning: Robyn's preferred kiss is cunnilingus. Audiences are compelled to sound out *baiser*, putting Robyn's words to their lips. Her text incites oral stimulation. The metaphors move beyond the text so that audiences are complicit in performing "The Kiss," and thus a metatextual cunnilingus.

Moreover, the metaphor extends beyond the immediately cited languages, suggesting Latin influences as well. As Nick pleasures Robyn with

oral sex, his lips contact her labia, which is Latin for lips.²⁴ The Latin implications reify the linguistic metaphors of a “baser” kiss, whereby two sets of lips are pressed together. In fact, some modern social circles refer to cunnilingus as “lip service.” Then, in the same line, rather than translating *baiser* as “fuck” in English, she explains that it means “‘fuck’ in braille” (43). Since Braille is read both visually and digitally, Robyn introduces another language and another sensory register to indicate that Nick is applying both oral and digital stimulation. Combining French, English, Latin, and Braille, Agbabi employs cunning linguistics to describe cunnilingus.

Only one lover, Nick, gives Robyn the kiss she enjoys most. The other two, John and Abs, are inferior lovers by comparison. Beginning with John, she explains that “My husband’s kiss is Southwark ale” (42), which she identifies in the opening line as “a pint of ... piss!” (1). However, Abs demonstrates an outright aversion to oral sex. When he demands a kiss, she responds by extending her rear out of her window and into his face:

he’s tonguing me but something’s weird:
too right, cos I ain’t got no beard,
stead of my lips, he got my rear!

(58–60)

When Abs senses her pubic hair against his mouth his response is less than favorable. Instead of submitting himself to her pleasure, he curses her and stalks off (61). Nick, however, is her preferred lover, because he is comfortable providing oral stimulation:

We’ve kissed
In English, French an every lisped
Linguistic twist, you get the gist.

(46–8)

Once again, Robyn combines different languages to construct “the gist”: cunnilingus provided by Nick. Oral sex is a service that John and Abs will not provide. So Robyn prizes Nick above her other lovers because he applies his mouth to her pleasure.

The dynamics of cunnilingus in this context are significant since Nick’s ability to speak is inhibited by the oral pleasure he is performing on Robyn, and she is both the focus of gratification and the narrator who supplants Chaucer’s Miller. According to Chaucer’s narrative structure, the Miller is the first speaker to disrupt the social hierarchy of *The Canterbury Tales* (I.1125–7).²⁵ I propose that a comparative analysis between Chaucer’s *The Miller’s Tale* and Agbabi’s “The Kiss” reveals the Chaucerian influences that Agbabi adapts to disrupt generic power networks, and thus advance women’s perspectives and pleasures. And

yet, observing Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale* within its literary context reveals innovations in the medieval English literary tradition—innovations that Agbabi perpetuates.

That's What He Said: Male Homosocial Networks in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and the Old French Fabliaux

Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* combines diverse cultural and linguistic influences to challenge dominant networks of power. At the outset, Chaucer's frame narrative appears to maintain a prevalent social hierarchy broadly classified as the three major estates: the Nobility (those who fight), the Clergy (those who pray), and the Commons (those who labor).²⁶ *The General Prologue* identifies each of the pilgrims in descending order of social rank, beginning with the Knight, his son the Squire, and the Yeomen, each of whom belongs to the noble social estate, or "those who fight." Then, the narrator introduces members of the second estate, those who pray: the Prioress, the Nun, the Monk, and the Friar. But every pilgrim does not conform neatly to the three estates, and Chaucer himself was keenly aware of shifting circumstances, particularly in the wake of the plague, that led to a rising middle class. The Host, Harry Bailey, proposes a game: the pilgrim who tells the best tale will win a dinner at the expense of the competitors. Matching the order of *The General Prologue*, as the game proceeds, the Knight is selected to speak first, after whom the Host suggests the Monk offer his tale, and so the order of the narratives appear to conform to the established social hierarchy. The Host asks the Monk "to quite with the Knyghtes tale" (to match the Knight's tale) and thus keep the quality of the game going (I.3119). But Robin, the Miller, is drunk. He disrupts the logical social order and insists on telling his tale, thus introducing social rivalry into the storytelling competition of the frame narrative. The Miller takes up the charge to *quite* and, as Karma Lochrie explains, he misunderstands the Host's meaning, and so the Miller aims to repay the Knight.²⁷ *Quiting* the Knight's tale, the Miller tells a complex fabliau. Employing an Old French literary genre to rival a figure of English nobility, Robin participates in a cultural heritage that subordinated the English language.

Anglo-Norman became the language of administration and institutions in England following the Norman Conquest of 1066. The marriages between Norman aristocratic men and early medieval English women fostered bilingualism.²⁸ Mary Catherine Davidson explains, "in late medieval England, the acquired languages of Latin and French linguistically signal minority, in-group memberships in professional, courtly, ecclesiastical and clerical groups," and so "Latin and French identify speakers and writers as members of specialized literate communities."²⁹ French language and literature maintained hierarchical privilege over English language and literature. Deanne Williams analyzes the means by which French influences medieval

(and early modern) English society, functioning as a sign of social privilege. She explains:

The categories of French and English imply not only linguistic and cultural but also class identities: speaking French serves to mark not only sophistication, but also class hierarchies, to mystify relations of power, and to legitimate mechanisms of social exclusion. When English chroniclers make critical remarks about the barbarousness of provincial English dialects ... they give voice to the prevailing sense of linguistic and cultural inferiority that is the legacy of conquest.³⁰

Moreover, Williams argues that Chaucer reverses this social hierarchy, employing his French influences to establish his own literary authority and an English literary tradition.³¹ For example, Chaucer constructs authority by emulating the poetic styles of his near contemporaries writing in French, including Eustache Deschamps, Jean Froissart, and Guillaume de Machaut.³² One of Chaucer's narrators, the Miller, similarly participates in fabliaux conventions that emerge from, in part, the Anglo-Norman culture that conquered and oppressed early English people, in order to disrupt the normative hierarchical order of storytellers. It may seem strange that Chaucer would employ a literary heritage associated with conquest to challenge the limitations of narrowly defined social structures. But the working-class Miller is invoking a literary culture that is associated with French, and thus higher social status, to tell a dirty story.

For example, *The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale* employ Old French borrowings to construct an erotic metaphor similar to the erotic linguistic intricacies observed in Agbabi's retelling above. Geoffrey W. Gust coins the term "Chaucerotics" to refer to the unique eroticism of Chaucer's poetry which requires an understanding of historical context to appreciate his sexual allusions.³³ In one such instance, Chaucer's Miller believes:

An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.
So he may fynde Goddes foyson there,
Of the remenant nedeth nat enquere.

(I.3163–6)

A husband should not be inquisitive
Of God's secrets, nor of his wife.
As long as he may find God's plenty there,
Of the rest he need not inquire.

Before he begins his tale, the Miller explains that a man does not need to worry about God's secrets—nor his wife's, including what she is doing

when she is out of his sight—so long as he is able to enjoy God's plenty. Lochrie focuses on the multivalence of "pryvetee," explaining, "[t]he double meaning of the word [pryvetee] applies to the wife to mean her secrets (and secret affairs) and her sexual organ."³⁴ Chaucer's *pryvetee* is borrowed from Old French.³⁵ Multiple linguistic intersections and meanings construct an erotic metaphor in *The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale*, just as Agbabi combines English and French to covertly suggest sexual acts concentrated on a woman's privates. As observed in the close reading of Agbabi's metaphors above, appreciation for Chaucer's erotic metaphors requires a comparative analysis with multilingual literary conventions.

Tracing such cross-cultural intersections, John Block Friedman observes that Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* may have been influenced by the thirteenth century, Old French *Berengier au Lonc Cul* (Berengier of the Long Ass) by Guérin and the Anglo-Norman *La Gageure* (The Wager) to construct his own "class-demoting kisses" on the rear.³⁶ In *Berengier au Lonc Cul*, a peasant man marries a woman above his status. He dons armor and attempts to convince her that he has been brave in battle. Suspecting his cowardice, she disguises herself as a knight and challenges her husband to either duel or kiss the ass of his challenger. The wife-disguised-as-knight presents her bare bottom to her defeated husband to receive her reward, his kiss:

cil esgarde la crevace
do cul & del con: ce li sanble
que trestot se tienent ensanble.

(241–4)

He looks over her nether place.
Asshole and [vagina] so close do lie,
They seem like one hole to his eye.³⁷

When she offers her rear to him, he perceives one long crack that runs from the knight's back to front. He does not accept that his opponent is a woman, and he cannot distinguish a vulva from an ass; hence the appended title "Berengier of the Long Ass." Friedman points out that Chaucer employs a similar kiss in *The Miller's Tale* that leads to "a loss in status, certainty, and authority for all the major characters but Alisoun."³⁸ Chaucer also maintains some of the confusion regarding non-phallic private parts, as the part of Alisoun touched by Absalon's lips is ambiguously referred to as her "hole":

[A]t the wyndow out she putte hir hole,
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
With his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
Ful savourly, er he were war of this.

Abak he stirte, and thought it was amys,
For wel he wiste a woman hath no berd.

(3732–7)

At the window out she put her hole,
And to Absalon it was no better nor worse,
So with his mouth he kissed her naked ass
Most sensually, before he was aware of this.
Aback and startled, he thought something amiss,
For well he knew a woman has no beard.

In the contexts of both Guérin's *Berengier au Lonc Cul* and Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, men who press their lips to a woman's private parts are shamed and lose their power. Moreover, women's bodies are poorly interpreted by the male gaze, opening an ambiguous hole in the text, in which "hole" refers indistinctly to either ass or vagina.

Chaucer's text does not clarify where exactly Absalon's lips landed, and this ambiguity replicates men's confusion about non-phallic anatomies found in multiple fabliaux, as E. Jane Burns observes when discussing both *Berengier au Lonc Cul* and *Farce Moralisee à Quatre Personnaiges* (Moralized Farce of Four People).³⁹ In *Farce Moralisee*, two husbands reduce all women to having either a bad ass or a bad head. Burns argues:

Male construction of female identity locates woman's difficult nature in two specific body parts, the head and the ass ... [T]he female "head" alludes to problems posed by woman's speech, and the trouble with the woman's "ass" involves her sexual activity ... a relentless struggle against two complementary sets of female lips.⁴⁰

"Ass" refers to women's private areas reductively, and so "ass" also implies labia, as observed in *Berengier au Lonc Cul* and Chaucer's ambiguous reference to Alisoun's "hole." These texts reduce women's anatomies and repress women's autonomies. Ultimately, the rhetorical strategy in these medieval texts silences women by exerting masculine control over both sets of lips, commodifying women's sexualities for male, phallogentric pleasures, and hindering women's expressions.

The larger framework of *The Canterbury Tales* also silences women by maintaining a homosocial network of storytelling that verges on the homoerotic. In the first two lines of *The General Prologue*, Chaucer describes "Aprille with his shoures soote / the droghte of March hath perced to the roote" (April with his sweet showers / has pierced the drought of March to the root, I.1–2). Dinshaw observes that the month of April is typically a feminine persona in literature, and so Chaucer's narrator creates the potential for a sodomitical relationship between two male figures who comprise both the natural setting for the pilgrims and the Spring season that traditionally

inspires medieval poetry.⁴¹ Thus, intimacy between two male figures begets poetic expression at the opening of a text regarded as one of the origins of the English literary tradition. "Father Chaucer's" homoerotic naturalism leads to the pilgrims' narrative competition.

Then, following the Knight's tale, the Host observes that the game is well begun, adding: "unbokeled is the male" (the pouch/man is open, I.3115). The primary meaning of "male" in Middle English refers to a bag or pouch, and so the Host indicates that the metaphorical bag of the storytelling competition is officially open—the games have begun.⁴² Nevertheless, "male" can also refer to masculinity, just as Gust points out: "later in *The Canterbury Tales* the Pardoner euphemistically asks the Host to 'unbokele' his phallic 'purs'" (VI.943–5).⁴³ The Host's multivalent comments following the Knight's opening contribution suggest that the narrative competition—*quiting*—is a man's arena.

Analyzing androcentric epistemologies in *The Canterbury Tales*, Carissa M. Harris observes a homosocial code of "felawe masculinity" (drinking buddies who share raunchy stories) running through Chaucer's text. "Felawe masculinity" unites the mercantile-artisan class of male pilgrims, including the Host, Miller, Reeve, Cook, Merchant, Manciple, and Shipman. Their tales reflect a fraternal discourse consisting of fabliaux conventions, obscenities, and sexual conquest; their narratives rhetorically compete with and appeal to other men.⁴⁴ *The Miller's Tale* in particular, she argues, "embed[s] lessons validating masculine aggression, and cast[s] women's resistance as both feigned and futile, [to which] the 'felawes' respond with raucous laughter" (I.3858).⁴⁵ Disturbingly, Harris traces these homosocial discursive practices to postmodern experiences in which appeals to this fellowship among men has legally exonerated rapists, and heaped shame and guilt upon women who survive their sexual assaults.⁴⁶ Obscene stories have a long heritage of objectifying women, silencing them, while strengthening the homosocial bonds between men. One possible narrative of resistance could thwart this tradition by silencing men to fulfill women's desires.

Agbabi's "The Kiss" does just that. Her text disrupts homosocial bonds between men, privileging the narrator's pleasure. She counters the misogyny of Old French fabliaux such as *Farce Moralisée* by liberating both sets of lips, combining pleasure with complex poetic metaphors that invite audiences to think about the layered implications of cunnilingus. *Telling Tales* continues the Chaucerian game of *quiting* as Agbabi's retelling *quites* her source text.

"Flip It and Reverse It": Privileging Women's Poetic Pleasures⁴⁷

Eroticism signifies liberation from multiple, intersecting apparatuses of oppression in Agbabi's texts. As we will see below, the prologue to *Telling Tales* identifies kissing between two women as the inspiration for retelling Chaucer's English literary classic. Similarly, in "The Kiss," cunnilingus

inspires a complicated, multilingual metaphor that exemplifies the speaker's poetic skill and narrative control. Both of these poems foreground women's erotic pleasures and poetic expressions. Manuela Coppola observes, "the erotic is a signifying principle interacting with [Agbabi's] experimental poetic form."⁴⁸ I would further argue that oral sex in "The Kiss" privileges Robyn's pleasure and poetic expression, and thus challenges the generic conventions that subordinate women to men's authorial and sexual control found in the corresponding early English source text: Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*. Moreover, Agbabi strategically inserts women's sexual pleasures into a "traditional" British English canon that includes Old English poets, ["Father"] Chaucer, Caxton's books, and Shakespeare to liberate this literary heritage from misogynistic conventions.

In the opening poems of Agbabi's *Telling Tales*, erotic pleasures challenge apparatuses of oppression that inform her source texts and the literary traditions from which her medievalism emerges. Audre Lorde explains the "erotic charge is not easily shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively european-american male tradition."⁴⁹ Suppressing women's sexual pleasure is a silencing strategy. As noted in the introduction to this book, Lorde explains:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feelings. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.⁵⁰

Western cultures generally continue to shame and mystify women's erotic pleasures, as observed in the earlier, medieval texts above, and modern texts that continue to control and objectify women's bodies. Reclaiming the erotic is a revolutionary act. Joan Morgan argues "a politics of pleasure (sexual and otherwise) [is] an integral part of fully realized humanity ... intersecting, challenging, and redefining dominant narratives about race, beauty, health and sex in ways that are generative and necessary."⁵¹ Agbabi challenges prevalent hierarchies, particularly along the axes of gender, sexuality, and class, by asserting women's pleasure unspoiled by phallic interference.

Agbabi challenges the androcentric inception to *The Canterbury Tales* with her gynocentric opening to *Telling Tales*. First, Chaucer's *General Prologue* describes a nearly traditional environment for romantic poetry: the seasons shift as April pierces the drought of March with sweet showers (I.1–2). As a result, vegetation flourishes, birds sing, and humans are filled with desires—to go on pilgrimage. Comparatively, Agbabi's "Prologue (Grime Mix)," the opening poem to her retelling of *The Canterbury Tales*, praises April's kisses as the source of inspiration for Harry "Bells" Bailey,

the speaker of the poem, who situates this text within a national English literary heritage:

See my jaw dropping neat Anglo-Saxon,
I got ink in my veins more than Caxton
and it flows hand to mouth, here's a mouthfeast,
verbal feats from the streets of the South-East.

(21–4)

Harry's influences range from the earliest English poetry composed in Old English to the first English texts produced by William Caxton's printing press. In addition to these early contributors to English literary canons, we already know that the source for Agbabi's collection is "Chaucer Tales ... the remix" (32). *The Canterbury Tales* represent a significant milestone in Middle English poetry because Chaucer's literature is informed by early English history and his characters capture the dialects of his diverse contemporaries. Similarly, Agbabi connects medieval and early modern historical figures to Harry "Bells" Bailey's working-class dialect, which is indicated by reference to South-East London streets, presumably Southwark. Informed by this long English literary heritage, Harry sings of April, who is the muse for these eloquent lines:

she inspires *them*
from the grime to the clean-cut iambic,
rime royale, rant or rap, get your slam kick.

(26–8)

Harry's love for April is expressed through various poetic styles that are foundational to English poetic conventions, ranging from the Chaucerian corpus to contemporary rap. Harry's lines, inspired by April, merge past and present through a confluence of metrical structures.

Moreover, Agbabi inverts the homoerotic encounter between two male personifications, April and May, found in Chaucer's *General Prologue*, with a new poem that praises lesbian intimacy. While Chaucer had begun *The Canterbury Tales* with the homoerotic encounter of a masculine personification of April penetrating March, Agbabi instead characterizes both April and the prologue's speaker, Harry "Bells" Bailey, as women. In the final lines of the poem, Harry explains, "I'm MC but the M is for mistress / when my April shows me what a kiss is" (45–6). MC is usually an abbreviation for "Master of Ceremonies." The speaker's instruction, to replace "master" with "mistress," informs audiences that Harry is a woman. Encouraging audiences to unpack words from their cultural memories and juxtapose "master" and "mistress" also implicates William Shakespeare, another canonical early English influence on Agbabi's poetics. Shakespeare's Sonnet 20 describes a young man who possesses "A

woman's face with nature's own hand painted" (1). The Fair Youth attracts men's gazes, and so the speaker of the sonnet is compelled to name him the "master-mistress" of his passion (2).⁵² Weaving this Shakespearean allusion into the prologue, in the context of a Chaucerian retelling, along with reference to William Caxton, locates *Telling Tales* within a continuum of the English literary heritage. But this postmodern addition inverts the homosocial and homoerotic networks that privileged literary exchange among men. Agbabi replants the homoerotic root of Chaucer's opening lines in *The Canterbury Tales*; in *Telling Tales* intimacy between women is the foundation for poetic innovation.

The prologue's clever gender reversal corresponds to the power dynamics encoded in the central sex act of Robyn's poem, "The Kiss." Cunnilingus, the narrator's preferred "kiss," situates Nick spatially below her. He is both literally and figuratively relegated beneath her. The one who performs cunnilingus can enjoy inducing pleasure, of course, but the recipient is directly stimulated. Also, with Nick's lips pressed against Robyn's labia, tongue extended, he cannot articulate anything more than perhaps some incoherent speech. Robyn, on the other hand, is capable of receiving his kiss and expressing herself without hindrance because her mouth remains unobstructed. This particular kiss subordinates Nick's pleasure and voice to Robyn's. Cunnilingus *quites* pervasive androcentrism that panders to men's sexual desires and expectations. Good sex, like social structures, does not revolve strictly around the phallus. Agbabi's encoded cunnilingus undermines phallogocentrism by representing oral stimulation as one woman's poetic inspiration.

Cunnilingus in "The Kiss" exposes the medieval discomfort with women's pleasures and sexual organs in both *The Miller's Tale* and some Old French fabliaux—a discomfort that pervades postmodern popular culture too. For example, April 14 is annually recognized by some as Cake and Cunnilingus Day to celebrate women's pleasures in stark contrast to the precipitating emergence of "Steak and Blowjob Day." The webpage dedicated to this international holiday notes that cunnilingus is taboo: it is censored in films (unlike fellatio), and many women are embarrassed to ask for oral sex from their partners.⁵³ Similarly, Amanda Montell observes that many people become squeamish around terms associated with vaginas, and yet they fluently refer to the penis despite violent euphemisms (nouns: sword, gun; verbs: drill, bang).⁵⁴ In popular culture, some male artists are praised for their rakish wit, boasting about their genitals and sexual conquests. Comparatively, Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion are met with stuffy reactions and outrage for similar cunnilingus metaphors such as "swipe your nose like a credit card" in the rap "WAP."⁵⁵ Other works, including *The Great Wall of Vagina*, undermine offense with art by fostering appreciation for diverse genitalia, specifically labia.⁵⁶ While most heteronormative hierarchies assume the phallus is the fulcrum on which ("vanilla") sexual pleasures pivot, unapologetic expressions of women's eroticisms reclaim a

feminine centrality to sexual pleasures. "The Kiss" participates in this revolutionary movement.

Agbabi expurgates the shame associated with women's genitalia found among some medieval source texts and modern popular culture. In the contexts of both *Berengier au Lonc Cul* and Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*, men who press their lips to a woman's private parts are shamed and lose their power to a woman who wields greater authority. But Agbabi combats the shame imposed upon the active partner who goes down for the purpose of performing oral stimulation on a woman. Her narrator, Robyn, ranks Nick above her other two lovers due to Nick's ability to perform cunnilingus, a sex act that John and Abs neglect or refuse to perform. Nick does not suffer a demotion in status, as observed in the medieval texts above; rather, his submission to her pleasure raises his hierarchical status. Cunnilingus challenges the phallocentrism of the first fragment of *The Canterbury Tales* and the broader literary conventions, such as fabliaux, in which Chaucer participates.

In "The Kiss," Agbabi inverts the power dynamics of fabliaux that expose women's sexualities as the subject of a comedic plot twist. In her discussion of women's *pryvetees* in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, Lochrie explains, "the logic of the fabliau requires ... women's sexuality be first secreted away and then exposed to the laughter of the public, including the world of the tale and the reading public."⁵⁷ Fabliaux traditionally make a spectacle of women's sexualities for comedic effect, *exposing* women's privacy to the ridicule of the male gaze. Agbabi emends this. Instead of exposing Robyn's sexuality, she uses metaphors to maintain her secrecy. The intersecting references between English, French, Latin, and Braille require some linguistic maneuvering between signs, sounds, and meanings. Audiences are enticed to penetrate the various layers of linguistic signs enfolding her cunnilingus connotations. Robyn enjoys erotic pleasure, *unexposed*—concealed by metaphors, exemplifying her poetic wit and authorial power. She challenges traditional politics of pleasure with erotic poetry.

Then, Robyn renders men's sexualities the locus of laughter by countering the violence of her Middle English source text and bolstering the comedic effect of the three men's interactions. In contrast, Chaucer's Miller describes Absalom impaling Nicholas with a red-hot colter, searing away layers of flesh:

And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot.
Of gooth the skyn an hande-brede aboute,
The hootte kultour brende so his toute,
And for the smert he wende for to dye.

(I.3810–13)

Into the middle of Nicholas's ass it went.
The area of a hand it left a searing dent,

That hot colter burned his nether eye,
 So great was the pain, he thought he would die.

Critics have identified the mock-sodomy in these lines, which Agbabi capitalizes on in her rendition, while expurgating the gruesome imagery.⁵⁸ She replaces the hot colter with Abs' member. Agbabi's alteration enhances the comedy of the narrative by adding another visual gag. John believes he is about to catch his wife having an affair, but when he opens the door he finds two men having sex: John is startled by Abs sodomizing Nick through his bedroom window (71–8). The men of Agbabi's fabliau are "exposed to the laughter of the public, including the world of the tale and the reading public."⁵⁹ The men are focused on each other. Lochrie, informed by Luce Irigaray, identifies a system in *The Miller's Tale* that privileges men's desires and interactions, reducing women to commodities for men's gratification.⁶⁰ Agbabi makes this homosocial network visible by emphasizing the role of sex within men's process of exchange. Nick's stamina is induced by the drugs Abs sells (35–6). But Nick does not achieve gratification with Robyn; instead, the fabliau culminates with Nick gratifying Abs, John as a voyeur, and Robyn is nearly invisible next this homoerotic spectacle (80).

In Chaucer's text, the central woman, Alisoun, is objectified by the three men, then she escaped unscathed and forgotten amid their quarreling for power. Now, in Agbabi's revision, Robyn receives oral pleasure from Nick, and she exercises narrative sovereignty over all three men. Agbabi *quites* the androcentric storytelling game by inverting the gendered conventions of fabliaux, privileging Robyn's sexual pleasure and poetic expressions. Additionally, she revives Chaucer's rhetorical strategies by enfolded audiences within complex games of multivalent interpretations.

Taking It in the End: Multivalent Moral Conclusions

A comparative analysis between the narrators' commentaries in both Chaucer's *The Miller's Prologue* and Agbabi's "The Kiss" exposes metatextual concerns with audiences' interactions with literature. The complexity of Agbabi's concluding lines, however, replicate both fabliaux conventions and Chaucerian complexity. In fact, Agbabi's retelling arguably follows fabliaux conventions more carefully than *The Miller's Tale*.⁶¹ For example, the succinct lines, tight narrative, and concluding moral of Agbabi's "The Kiss" are consistent with the French fabliaux of the thirteenth century. Within the limited space of her retelling, Agbabi does not sacrifice distinct characterizations. Drawing on some audiences' cultural memories of *The Canterbury Tales* to deliver complex characters, her metaphors and juxtapositions open a concise narrative to a host of complexities that challenge both medieval and modern social hierarchies. Moreover, her concluding moral is both consistent with fabliaux conventions and her multivalence revives Chaucerian

rhetorical strategies. Demonstrating poetic wit, like Chaucer, Agbabi's text incites audiences to read personal, socially constructed assumptions and the effects these have on interpretation and gratification.

Beginning with the final lines of *The Miller's Tale*, Chaucer has Robin round off his narrative with a summary, rather than a conventional fabliau moral. But well before the Miller's tale is even begun, the Chaucerian narrator shares his moral perspective with the audience. Elegantly distancing himself from the Miller's crass content, he advises audiences to do the same, and seek out a noble tale of moral value:

Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.
The Millere is a cherl; ye knowe wel this.

(I.3177–82)

Turn over the page and choose another tale;
For he will find enough, great and small,
Of histories exemplifying gentility,
And also morality and holiness.
Do not blame me if you choose amiss.
The Miller is a churl; you already knew this.

Chaucer warns sensitive audiences to forego the Miller's tale, pointing out that anyone familiar with the stereotype he represents could make assumptions about his narrative's content: if you read on then you only have yourself to blame. Agbabi's narrator, Robyn, concludes "The Kiss" with both a succinct moral conclusion that is consistent with fabliau conventions, and a similar Chaucerian strategy that holds audiences responsible for their own pleasure in her narrative:

If you drink your beer in a tulip glass
an kiss the air cos you think you're class
but draw the line at this French farce,
bon appétit—French-kiss my arse!

(89–92)

The final line combines (1) a common French phrase that is used in the context of fine dining, "*bon appétit*"; (2) a vulgar English idiom, "kiss my arse"; (3) enhanced by French kissing with one's protruded tongue—altogether cleverly alluding to another carnal English colloquialism: "eat my ass." But Robyn's conclusion is not necessarily giving audiences the kiss off (pun intended). Her double entendre is open to multiple interpretations. For

audiences who maintain superficial, sophisticated appearances, and rely on the social privilege associated with French culture, this is a dismissal. With a final crude rejection, Robyn torments prim and proper audiences who are offended by fabliaux, the same audiences addressed by Chaucer's moralizing above. And yet, for those audiences who, like her, know French and enjoy fabliaux, the closing line is an invitation. She is offering another sort of kiss.

Specifically, countering the phallic focus of the "unboked ... male" that dominates the commencement of the Canterbury pilgrims' storytelling game, Agbabi's poetics direct audiences to sites of women's erotic pleasures. Contrary to the intricate linguistic innuendos Robyn previously used to convey cunnilingus, in the conclusion of the tale she avoids the confusion of orifices found in some medieval fabliaux that reduce women's private parts to a single ambiguous hole. Robyn is very clear about where audiences can put their lips: "kiss my arse" (92). This reversal from cunnilingus to anilingus indicates Agbabi's familiarity with the Old French and Middle English source texts, alluding to the hybridization of women's private parts found among the medieval fabliaux. As we saw earlier, in both *Berengier au Lonc Cul* and *The Miller's Tale*, intimate oral encounters with the central woman's *cul et con* are intermingled and exchanged based on interpretation, and this open interpretation extends to Robyn's concluding moral. "The Kiss" is not content to reinvent Chaucerian narratives for modern audiences; Agbabi also innovates the French influences on both Middle and Modern English.

In some English-speaking contexts, French culture is a signifier enigmatically situated at opposite ends of a spectrum extending from courteous to crude. First, as detailed above, French was a literary language associated with conquest, and thus social privilege, in medieval England. It connotes authority. Next, French is the reputed language of love in both medieval and modern contexts, signifying elitism and cultural refinement. French is also the language of intense intimacy, even eroticism. For example, French kissing in modern English colloquialisms, also described above, is discerned by an erotic entangling of tongues. Alternatively, at the opposite end of the spectrum, "pardon my French" is a colloquial request to forgive vulgarities. Both Chaucer and Agbabi undermine social hierarchies that privilege French as a signifier of elite social status by emphasizing lascivious sex acts expressed, in part, with French phrases.

Among the works analyzed here by Chaucer and Agbabi, French is the language of carnal pleasures. As a point of comparison, Chaucer's narrator, Robin Miller, challenged the medieval social hierarchy that privileged other estates above his working-class point of view. And Chaucer's English poetry challenges the social hierarchy that privileged French in his medieval social context.⁶² More specifically, as Lochrie notes above, he borrows from Old French to construct a complex metaphor that refers to women's *pryvetees*, and thus debasing a linguistic culture associated with *fin'amor*.⁶³

These same rhetorical strategies are replicated in "The Kiss," as Agbabi's French phrases undermine the pretentiousness that some associate with the French language by referring to baser activities. As noted in the introduction, Agbabi's style melds graphic depictions with sophisticated poetic forms so that prudish audiences who dismiss the text on a cursory reading fail to appreciate the complex literary structure of a sestina such as "Miss De Meanour," for example. Offended audiences fail to fully appreciate her artistry, which elicits both carnal and poetic pleasures. Similarly, in "The Kiss," Robyn's final phrase in French, "bon appétit—French-kiss my arse!" both taunts snobbish audiences to put their mouths where they dare not imagine, and it invites audiences who are well-versed in the use of multiple "tongues" to put their eloquence to good use serving oral stimulation (89–92). Leaving interpretation up to the audience, Robyn *quites* the fabricated boundaries of an elitist hierarchy by playing with the multivalence of language and its social registers. Once again, Agbabi's attention to Old French fabliaux conventions disrupts social hierarchies. Replicating a Chaucerian strategy, audiences' interpretations reveal more about themselves as they impose meaning onto the text.

Agbabi's medievalism both continues and challenges the social game of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. Working across temporalities, social classes, and linguistic differences, she invigorates a familiar cultural narrative found in *The Canterbury Tales* with new applications and irony. *Telling Tales* demonstrates the means by which innovation is born of intersectionality, particularly at sites of intercultural amalgamation, exemplified by Agbabi's metaphorical representation of cunnilingus. Combining refined French phrases with her intimate knowledge of *The Canterbury Tales*, Agbabi's "The Kiss" focuses on Robyn's personal narrative and sexual pleasure. The narrator's poetic devices incite audiences, along with Nick, to orally stimulate her without interrupting her narrative control—after all, it is impolite to speak when one's mouth is full.

Notes

- 1 Victoria Young, "Giving the Boys at Eton Poetry to Think About," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/05/arts/giving-the-boys-at-eton-poetry-to-think-about.html>.
- 2 Patience Agbabi, "About," *Telling Tales*. *Wordpress*. Accessed August 14, 2022, <https://patienceagbabi.wordpress.com/about/>.
- 3 Patience Agbabi, "Stories in Stanza'd English: A Cross-Cultural *Canterbury Tales*," *Literature Compass* 15, no. 6 (2018): 1–8, at 3.
- 4 Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, 6th ed. (Paris: Champion, 1964), B 30; R. Howard Bloch, "Introduction," in *The Fabliaux*, trans. Nathaniel E. Dubin (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), xxi.
- 5 "fin'amor," in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 6 Sarah Kay, Terence Cave, and Malcolm Bowie, *A Short History of French Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22.

- 7 Moshe Lazar, "Fin'amor," in *A Handbook of the Troubadours*, eds. F.R.P. Akehurst and Judith M. Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 75.
- 8 Larry D. Benson, "Courtly Love and Chivalry in the Later Middle Ages," in *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1984), 240.
- 9 Raymond Eichmann, "Introduction," in *Fabliaux Fair and Foul*, trans. John DuVal (Binghamton, New York: State University of New York, 1992), xiv.
- 10 Homosocial relationships are performed or discursively produced by men in relation to other men. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 24.
- 11 Dinshaw contrasts masculine linguistic meaning with "the surfaces on which these acts reveal—the page, the text, the literal sense, or even the hidden meaning—in other words:] the feminine," Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 9.
- 12 Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* 4–5.
- 13 Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 225–7. Karma Lochrie, "Women's 'Pryvetees' and Fabliau Politics in the *Miller's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 6.2 (1994): 289.
- 14 Theresa Earenfight, "Where Do We Go from Here? Some Thoughts on Power and Gender in the Middle Ages," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 51 (Spring 2015): 125–6.
- 15 John Dryden, *Fables Ancient and Modern* (London, 1700), np, *Early English Books Online*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo;idno=A36625.0001.001>.
- 16 Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 1998), 115.
- 17 Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 5.
- 18 Patience Agbabi, *Telling Tales* (Edinburgh, UK: Canongate, 2015). All citations refer to line numbers within the specified poem.
- 19 "baiser, n. and v," *Cambridge Dictionary: French-English Dictionary*. 2014. Cambridge University, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/french-english/baiser>.
- 20 "baiser, verbe trans," *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*. (Université de Lorraine, 2014), <http://www.atilf.fr/tlfi>.
- 21 "base, adj. and n.6," *OED Online*. (Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15854?rskey=o8lkuc&result=1>.
- 22 *Baiser*, "a kiss," and *baisser*, "to go down," are pronounced slightly differently. "base, n.1," *OED Online*. September 2020. Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15848?rskey=Q14yZA&result=1>.
- 23 "langue, n," *Cambridge Dictionary: French-English Dictionary*. 2014. Cambridge University, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/french-english/langue>.
- 24 "lābīa, -ae, f.," in *A Latin Dictionary*, by Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), 1023. In fact, *labia* is an irregular, heteroclite noun because it declines as both a feminine singular and a neuter plural noun. In *The Plaint of Nature*, Alan of Lille maps this grammatical irregularity onto people, claiming that heteroclite nouns are associated with inconsistent people whose (sexual) desires change as easily as the seasons. "Alan of Lille, 'De plancu Naturae,'" *Studi medievali*, 3rd series, 19, ed. Nikolaus M. Häring, (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1978): Prosa 4.83–7; Valerie Allen, "Alan of Lille on the Little Bits that Make a Difference," in *Sexuality, Sociality, and Cosmology in Medieval Literary Texts*, ed. Jennifer N. Brown and Marla Segol (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 38.

- 25 All citations of Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
- 26 Jill Mann, *Chaucer and the Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 3–8.
- 27 Lochrie, “Fabliau Politics in the *Miller's Tale*,” 291. The Miller’s understanding of *quite* connoting vengeance is reflected in the context of his tale as Absolon overhears Nicholas mocking him and vows, “I shal thee quyte” (I.3746). Chaucer describes the Miller as a wrestler in *The General Prologue* (I.545–8); wrestling matches sometimes pitted members of the upper and lower class against one another. Gregory M. Colón Semenza acknowledges that the Knight is the Miller’s social superior, but wrestling levels the discursive playing field, and so the Miller is well equipped to *quite*, or best, the Knight in their storytelling competition, “Historicizing ‘Wrastlynge’ in *The Miller's Tale*,” *The Chaucer Review* 38.1 (2003): 66–7.
- 28 Marilyn Corrie, “Middle English: Dialects and Diversity,” in *The Oxford History of English*, ed. Lynda Mugglestone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 116.
- 29 Mary Catherine Davidson, “Code-Switching and Authority in Late Medieval England,” *Neophilologus* 87 (2003): 475.
- 30 Deanne Williams, *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 20.
- 31 Williams, *French Fetish*, 19.
- 32 Murray L. Brown, “Poets, Peace, the Passion, and the Prince: Eustache Deschamps ‘Ballade to Chaucer,’” in *Chaucer's French Contemporaries: The Poetry/Poetics of Self and Tradition*, ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: AMS, 1999), 192.
- 33 Geoffrey W. Gust, *Chaucerotics: Uncloaking the Language of Sex in The Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3.
- 34 Lochrie, “Fabliau Politics in the *Miller's Tale*,” 292.
- 35 “privé, n.,” *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Robert E. Lewis, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), in online edition in *Middle English Compendium*, ed. Frances McSparran, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000–2018), <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>.
- 36 John Block Friedman, “Bottom-Kissing and the Fragility of Status in Chaucer’s *Miller's Tale*,” *The Chaucer Review* 54.2 (2019): 119–40. Jill Mann also identifies Berengier as a possible source for *The Miller's Tale*, “Speaking Images in Chaucer’s *Miller's Tale*,” in *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V.A. Kolve*, ed. R.F. Yeager and Charlotte C. Morse (Asheville: Pegasus Press, 2001), 244; *Berengier au Lonc Cul* is found in both Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, fr. 837, and fr. 19152. *La Gageure* is in London, British Library, Harley 2253.
- 37 *Berengier au Lonc Cul* in *The Fabliaux*, trans. Nathaniel E. Dubin (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 226–7.
- 38 Friedman, “Bottom-Kissing,” 120; Friedman’s term, “posture,” is significant here as he draws some of his conclusions from English and French conduct books that explicitly warn against positions such as crouching or squatting because they indicate a diminished status (129).
- 39 *Farce Moralisé*, also known as *Les Deux Maris et leurs deux femmes dont l'une a malle teste et l'autre est tendre du cul*, is translated in Jody Enders, *Holy Deadlock and Other Ribaldries: Another Dozen Medieval French Plays in Modern English* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 226–73.

- 40 E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 31.
- 41 Carolyn Dinshaw, "Chaucer's Queer Touches/A Queer Touches Chaucer," *Exemplaria* 7 (1995): 82.
- 42 "mäl(e n.(2))" *Middle English Dictionary*. Ed. Robert E. Lewis, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001). Online edition in Middle English Compendium. Ed. Frances McSparran, et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000–2018), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED26622/track?counter=5&search_id=10182470.
- 43 Gust, *Chaucerotics*, 79.
- 44 Carissa M. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2028), 35–6.
- 45 Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 46.
- 46 Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 26–9.
- 47 Missy Elliott, "Work It," track 4 on *Under Construction*, Missy Elliott and Tim "Timbaland" Mosley, Goldmind Inc. and Elektra Records, 2002.
- 48 Manuela Coppola, "Queering Sonnets: Sexuality and Transnational Identity in the Poetry of Patience Agbabi," *Women: A Cultural Review* 26.4 (2015): 375.
- 49 Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, ed. adrienne maree brown (Chico, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019), 34.
- 50 Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 27.
- 51 Joan Morgan, "Why We Get Off: Moving towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure," *The Black Scholar* 45.4 (2015): 46.
- 52 William Shakespeare. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (London: International Thomson Publishing, 1998), 151.
- 53 Ms. Naughty, "About Cake and Cunnilingus Day," *Cake and Cunnilingus Day*, <http://www.cakeandcunnilingus.com/about.html>.
- 54 Amanda Montell, *Wordslut: A Feminist Guide to Taking Back the English Language* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019) 256–9.
- 55 Cardi B featuring Megan Thee Stallion, "WAP," Belcalis Almanzar, Megan Pete, Austin Owens, James Foye III, and Frank Rodriguez, Atlantic Records, WAP single, 2020; Arwa Mahdawi, "The WAP Uproar Shows Conservatives Are Fine with Female Sexuality—As Long As Men Control It," *The Guardian*, August 15, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/15/cardi-b-megan-thee-stallion-wap-conservatives-female-sexuality>.
- 56 Jamie McCartney, *The Great Wall of Vagina*, 2013, plaster casts, 26 feet, Triennale di Milano museum, Milan.
- 57 Lochrie, "Fabliau Politics in the *Miller's Tale*," 293–4.
- 58 David Lorenzo Boyd, "Seeking 'Goddess Pryvete': Sodomy, Quitting and Desire in *The Miller's Tale*," in *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, ed. Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 243–60; Britton J. Harwood, "The 'Nether Ye' and Its Antitheses: A Structuralist Reading of *The Miller's Tale*," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 21 (1981): 5–30; Dolores Warwick Frese, "The Homoerotic Underside in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*," *The Michigan Academician* 10 (1977): 143–50.
- 59 Lochrie, "Fabliau Politics in the *Miller's Tale*," 294.
- 60 Lochrie, "Fabliau Politics in the *Miller's Tale*," 288–90.
- 61 Chaucer elaborates on his characters, giving them more dimension than is found across more than 150 surviving French fabliaux. His tale weaves multiple fabliau plots together with longer lines, resulting in a longer narrative.
- 62 Williams, *French Fetish*, 19.
- 63 Lochrie, "Fabliau Politics in the *Miller's Tale*," 292.

References

- Agbabi, Patience *Telling Tales*. Edinburgh, UK: Canongate, 2015.
- . "Stories in Stanza'd English: A cross-cultural *Canterbury Tales*." *Literature Compass* 15.6 (2018): 1–8.
- . "About." *Telling Tales*. Wordpress. Accessed August 14, 2022. <https://patienceagbabi.wordpress.com/about/>.
- Allen, Valerie. "Alan of Lille on the Little Bits that Make a Difference." In *Sexuality, Sociality, and Cosmology in Medieval Literary Texts*, edited by Jennifer N. Brown and Marla Segol, 33–54. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Bédier, Joseph. *Les Fabliaux*. 6th ed. Paris: Champion, 1964.
- Benson, Larry D. "Courtly Love and Chivalry in the Later Middle Ages." In *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays*, edited by Robert F. Yeager, 237–257. Hamden: Archon Books, 1984.
- Berengier au Lonc Cul in The Fabliaux*, translated by Nathaniel E. Dubin. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013.
- Bloch, R. Howard. "Introduction." In *The Fabliaux*, translated by Nathaniel E. Dubin, xiii–xxv. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013.
- Boyd, David Lorenzo. "Seeking "Goddes Pryvetee": Sodomy, Quitting and Desire in *The Miller's Tale*." In *Words and Works: Studies in Medieval English Language and Literature in Honour of Fred C. Robinson*, edited by Peter S. Baker and Nicholas Howe, 243–260. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998.
- Brown, Murray L. "Poets, Peace, the Passion, and the Prince: Eustache Deschamps "Ballade to Chaucer."" In *Chaucer's French Contemporaries: The Poetry/Poetics of Self and Tradition*, edited by R. Barton Palmer, 187–215. New York: AMS, 1999.
- Burger, Glenn. *Chaucer's Queer Nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Burns, E. Jane. *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Cambridge Dictionary: French-English Dictionary*. Cambridge University, 2014. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>.
- Cardi B featuring Megan Thee Stallion. "WAP." Edited by Belcalis Almanzar, Megan Pete, Austin Owens, James Foye III, and Frank Rodriguez. New York: Atlantic Records, *WAP Single*, 2020.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. Edited by Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Colón Semenza, Gregory M. "Historicizing "Wrastlynge" in *The Miller's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 38.1 (2003): 66–82.
- Coppola, Manuela. "Queering Sonnets: Sexuality and Transnational Identity in the Poetry of Patience Agbabi." *Women: A Cultural Review* 26.4 (2015): 369–383.
- Corrie, Marilyn. "Middle English: Dialects and Diversity." In *The Oxford History of English*, edited by Lynda Mugglestone, 106–146. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Davidson, Mary Catherine. "Code-Switching and Authority in Late Medieval England." *Neophilologus* 87 (2003): 473–486.
- Dinshaw, Carolyn. *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.
- . "Chaucer's Queer Touches/A Queer Touches Chaucer." *Exemplaria* 7 (1995): 75–92.

- Dryden, John. *Fables Ancient and Modern*. London: Early English Books Online, 1700. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=eebo;idno=A36625.0001.001>.
- Earenfight, Theresa. "Where Do We Go From Here? Some Thoughts on Power and Gender in the Middle Ages." *Medieval Feminist Forum* 51 (2015): 116–131.
- Eichmann, Raymond. "Introduction." In *Fabliaux Fair and Foul*. Translated by John DuVal, v–xxi. Binghamton, New York: State University of New York, 1992.
- Elliott, Missy. "Work It." track 4 on *Under Construction*, edited by Missy Elliott and Tim "Timbaland" Mosley. Los Angeles: Goldmind Inc. and Elektra Records, 2002.
- Enders, Jody. *Holy Deadlock and Other Ribaldries: Another Dozen Medieval French Plays in Modern English*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017.
- Foucault, Michel. *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Edited by James D. Faubion. New York: New Press, 1998.
- Frese, Dolores Warwick. "The Homoerotic Underside in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*." *The Michigan Academician* 10 (1977): 143–150.
- Friedman, John Block. "Bottom-Kissing and the Fragility of Status in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 54.2 (2019): 119–140.
- Gust, Geoffrey W. *Chaucerotics: Uncloaking the Language of Sex in The Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
- Harris, Carissa M. *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2028.
- Harwood, Britton J. "The "Nether Ye" and Its Antitheses: A Structuralist Reading of *The Miller's Tale*." *Annuaire Mediaevale* 21 (1981): 5–30.
- Kay, Sarah, Terence Cave, and Malcolm Bowie, *A Short History of French Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Lazar, Moshe. "Fin'amor." In *A Handbook of the Troubadours*, edited by F.R.P. Akehurst and Judith M. Davis, 61–100. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
- Lewis, Charlton T., and Charles Short. *A Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1879.
- de Lille, Alan. "De planctu Naturae." *Studi medievali*, 3rd series, 19, edited by Nikolaus M. Häring. Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 1978.
- Lochrie, Karma. "Women's 'Pryvetees' and Fabliau Politics in the *Miller's Tale*." *Exemplaria* 6.2 (1994): 287–304.
- Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." In *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, edited by adrienne maree brown, 27–35. Chico, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019.
- Mahdawi, Arwa. "The WAP Uproar Shows Conservatives Are Fine with Female Sexuality—As Long As Men Control It." *The Guardian*, August 15, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/15/cardi-b-megan-thee-stalion-wap-conservatives-female-sexuality>.
- Mann, Jill. *Chaucer and the Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

- . "Speaking Images in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*." In *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V.A. Kolve*, edited by R. F. Yeager and Charlotte C. Morse, 237–253. Asheville: Pegasus Press, 2001.
- McCartney, Jamie. *The Great Wall of Vagina*. Milan: Plaster Casts, 26 feet, Triennale di Milano Museum, 2013.
- Middle English Dictionary*, edited by Robert E. Lewis, et al. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001. Online edition in *Middle English Compendium*, edited by Frances McSparran, et al. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000–2018. <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/>.
- Montell, Amanda. *Wordslut: A Feminist Guide to Taking Back the English Language*. New York: HarperCollins, 2019.
- Morgan, Joan. "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." *The Black Scholar* 45.4 (2015): 36–46.
- Ms. Naughty. "About Cake and Cunnilingus Day." *Cake and Cunnilingus Day*. <http://www.cakeandcunnilingus.com/about.html>.
- The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, edited by Robert E. Bjork. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press, 2020. <https://www.oed.com/>.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones. London: International Thomson Publishing, 1998.
- Trésor de la langue française informatisé*. Université de Lorraine, 2014. <http://www.atilf.fr/tlfi>.
- Williams, Deanne. *The French Fetish from Chaucer to Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Young, Victoria. "Giving the Boys at Eton Poetry to Think About." *The New York Times*. March 5, 2005. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/05/arts/giving-the-boys-at-eton-poetry-to-think-about.html>.