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Afterlives

Candace Barrington and Jonathan Hsy

For a long time, Chaucer’s afterlife was considered singular, in both senses of the term. Not only was Chaucer’s reputation singular – he was famously hailed by John Dryden in 1700 as “the Father of English poetry,” unrivaled by his medieval contemporaries – but also his reputation was primarily shaped and transmitted by learned men. In the process, they themselves entered into one grand master narrative of British tradition: first poets, then antiquarians and then academics, with ever increasing emphasis on specialist expertise and cultural authority granted through learning and patient work. Recent approaches have emphasized that Chaucer has always had multiple afterlives created by learned and popular audiences, readers varied in gender and class, and local reception histories extending beyond British cultural frameworks. This essay briefly surveys some of these multiple Chaucerian afterlives and suggests avenues for further exploration. Although our discussion focuses specifically on textual media and literary reception, the references and suggested readings address related visual, artistic, performance-based, and digital contexts.

The afterlives of Geoffrey Chaucer showcase each subsequent generation’s efforts to adapt his works to a new cultural moment. Perceiving his works as products of a distant culture composed in increasingly archaic language, Chaucer’s postmedieval audiences have desired to make an alien past into something familiar and knowable. Consequently, Chaucer’s afterlives often reveal more about his readers than about the man or his texts. For instance, Chaucer’s well-worn moniker as the “father” of English linguistic and literary tradition points more to early modern desires for a monolingual English culture that separates itself apart from continental influences rather than Chaucer’s invention of an English tradition ex nihilo. Similar patterns of desire and imitation are repeated in the three categories of Chaucerian afterlives examined here: (1) his shifting biography, (2) the transmission history of his material texts and (3) the ways his literary works have been appropriated by artists and authors over time. Although we discuss these categories separately, they interconnect and inform one another. This chapter provides a brief introduction to
the first two of these topics, with most of its emphasis landing on the third, his reception and transformation by other writers and artists. We approach varied appropriations of Chaucer not as mere curiosities but as interventions with much to tell us about the malleability and flexibility of Chaucerian source material.

Geoffrey Chaucer in Historical Time

Creating an account of Chaucer’s life might seem like an easy task. Not only do his life records associate with him more than 493 contemporaneous documents (more than we have for Shakespeare whose career comes two centuries later), but very early portraits of the author appear in the Ellesmere manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* as well as Thomas Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes* soon after Chaucer’s death. With so many available facts and a likely figure of the poet seemingly drawn from life, it might appear we have many reliable ways to access to historical circumstances and motivations of Chaucer himself. But such evidence can take us only so far.

Although we are fairly certain he served in the household of Elizabeth de Burgh, the wife of Lionel and daughter-in-law of Edward III, it is not clear how he came to serve in the king’s army during the siege of Reims (1359–60). Although we know that he was granted safe conduct through Navarre in 1366, we don’t know why. Although we know that one *Geffray Chaucer… et… Philippe sa femme* were rendered a series of life annuities from the Lancastrian household – and evidence points to this Philippa as the sister of Katherine Swynford – we know almost nothing about their marriage. Although we know that between 1366 and 1373 Chaucer made several trips to the continent on the king’s business, we don’t know what expertise caused him to be tapped for these diplomatic and business journeys: perhaps it was his legal knowledge gained at his supposed Inns of Court training, his commercial knowledge gained through his father’s wine-importing business, or his facility with multiple languages. Although we know that Chaucer was appointed controller of the wool custom, the position was compromised by Nicholas Brembre’s shenanigans and the work interrupted by other obligations to the crown.

Similarly, we know little about the conditions under which he wrote or transmitted his verse. Despite familial connections to the Lancastrian household, there is no firm evidence that Chaucer ever received commissions or remuneration – royal or otherwise – for any poetry he wrote. Chaucer’s reputation as a distinctly English voice seems undercut by one of the first literary references to him, Eustace Deschamps’s “Ballade to Chaucer”: the French poet commends his English peer as the “Grant translateur” who has transplanted French rose (the *Roman de la rose*) to English soil. Even long-held truisms (Chaucer died with the *Canterbury Tales* in 10 distinct fragments) or newly discovered facts (Chaucer’s scribe was a scrivener named Adam Pinkhurst) are subject to reevaluation. In short, we have many bits of data and multiple ways to connect and understand them.

These multiple interpretative possibilities invited by evidentiary gaps have ensured the predictable appearance of new Chaucer biographies, beginning with Speght’s 1598 edition that included a “Life” of Chaucer (Figure 3.1). The poet’s biographical narrative has stabilized somewhat for modern readers with Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson’s 1966 *Chaucer Life-Records*. Still, each generation creates a Chaucer in its own image. Although newly discovered documents have been few, biographies of Chaucer nevertheless differ in how they reflect the interests and obsessions of contemporary audiences. Until the mid-twentieth century, biographers tended to depict a genial poet in the mold of an English gentleman wise enough to anticipate the Protestant
Reformation’s basic principles or America’s democratic values. Since the mid-twentieth century, Chaucer’s biographers have situated him as a wily courtier, diplomat, and bureaucrat with the political savvy to safely negotiate dangers of a tumultuous age.

Most recently, Paul Strohm’s “micro-biography” *Chaucer’s Tale: 1386 and the Road to Canterbury* (2014) has created an engaging account of one year in the poet’s life for the consumption of popular audiences weaned on historical fiction. With a clear arc, suspenseful dénouement, and a compromised yet sympathetic protagonist, *Chaucer’s Tale* presents a thoroughly twenty-first-century man torn between his job and his vocation, the comforts of a steady position and the vagaries of crooked bosses. By selecting his details with great care, Strohm crafts a tale of woes that his own present-day audience can find familiar: the commuter marriage; the bureaucratic job with perks too good to leave and demands too compromising to tolerate; powerful, unscrupulous bosses with little cultural capital; and eviction to the suburbs.4

Chaucer assumes a most vibrant twenty-first-century form through the *Chaucer Hath a Blog* online phenomenon. Chaucer’s blogger persona (launched by medieval literature professor Brantley L. Bryant in 2006) simultaneously lives in a Ricardian London at war with its “grete enemeye Fraunce” (Bryant 2010: 5 October 2006) yet also anguishes over the slanders hurled at “Britney de Speres” (17 September 2007). Chaucer might be a man of the Middle Ages, yet he sympathizes with the travails of modern academics in such matters as their search for permanent employment (5 January 2007). In 2011, the Chaucer blogger persona was transferred to a new twitter account with the handle @*LeVostreGC* and a digital avatar repurposing the iconic Hoccleve portrait. This tweeting Chaucer who opines in Middle English on topics as wide ranging as current television shows, films, and political debates has garnered tens of thousands of online followers. Since 2014, @*LeVostreGC* has made regular guest appearances on National Public Radio’s website as “our favorite medieval advice columnist” dispensing wisdom to lovers, travelers, and students.5 The melding of fourteenth-century and twenty-first sensibilities online (first in the blogosphere and now the twittersphere) and the wide audience it has generated attests to an ongoing process of readers embracing a long-dead Chaucer as a beloved friend who understands current preoccupations. There is something about Chaucer that makes him an object of affection, an intimate friend who “says that which lies close to [the reader’s] own soul” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Matthews 2010: 763). Such affection for Chaucer and a desire for contact with the poet as a dynamic, living presence extends across textual media and geographical space.

**Material Texts and Remediation**

From the time Thomas Hoccleve mourned the loss of his literary “fader,” readers have mourned the loss of Chaucer’s congenial companionship. Unable to resurrect his body, they have nurtured his literary corpus — first in manuscripts, then in printed editions, and finally in digital media and online communities. And just as there are huge gaps in Chaucer’s biography, there remain large gaps in our knowledge of how Chaucer’s verse was transmitted from his pen to the earliest Chaucerian manuscripts. These gaps have allowed manuscripts, particularly those of the *Canterbury Tales*, to be used to create multiple afterlives for Chaucer’s verse immediately following his death. There are numerous theories as to how they should be arranged now, but each is quickly undermined by new interpretations of old data. In keeping with postmodern sensibilities, these manuscripts are currently seen as based on earlier, now lost exemplars that placed the
tales in no fixed order and delegated the links to separate leaves, making them easily lost or roving across multiple spots in the text. More radically, scholars are now beginning to abandon the notion of the *Tales* being transmitted as 10 fragments (as the current convention of numbering the verse by fragment and lines would suggest).

Chaucer was one of the first English poets inaugurated by William Caxton into the new technological medium of Western movable type. His 1476 printed edition of the *Canterbury Tales* was followed by a second edition in 1483 and then by editions of Chaucer’s works from other editors in England such as William Thynne in 1532 (with subsequent editions appearing in regular intervals), John Stow in 1561, and Thomas Speght in 1598, each taking advantage of Chaucer’s reputation by associating as many texts as possible with him. In addition to assorted literary texts, the editions accumulated prefaces, glosses, commentaries, and notes, the ever-expanding extra material marking Chaucer’s canonicity and his readers’ distance from late fourteenth-century England. Not until Thomas Tyrwhitt’s 1775–8 edition do we find efforts to print only works that can be positively attributed to Chaucer, thus beginning the era of textual scholarship and scholarly editions. Chaucer’s textual canon gradually narrowed until it became more or less fixed in the late nineteenth century, culminating in many ways with F. N. Robinson’s 1933 edition (revised in 1957) of *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, replete with explanatory notes (emphasizing scholarship recently produced in the United States) that helped make it an edition indispensable to scholars worldwide.

Since then, the extratextual apparatus has ballooned in the form of published books, refereed articles, blogs, and websites disassociated from the material texts of Chaucer’s verse.

In the past three decades, the earliest Chaucerian texts have increasingly gone digital. Whereas many manuscripts and early modern print versions of the *Canterbury Tales* and other Chaucerian works remain carefully guarded as material artefacts at research libraries, the texts are increasingly available through digitized images online. As online modes of accessing Chaucer continue to proliferate, the “digital cousins” of Chaucerian texts become active participants “in our own cultural moment.” The Digital Scriptorium (a network of digitized medieval and Renaissance manuscript images hosted by the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley), the Digitised Manuscripts catalog of the British Library, Chaucer Texts Online (curated by the New Chaucer Society), and *The Open Access Companion to The Canterbury Tales* (edited by Candace Barrington et al.) give researchers and students increasingly varied avenues for accessing Chaucer. Such resources do more than transfer Chaucer’s texts into new media platforms; they allow Chaucer to be perpetually reinvented by researchers, students, and an expanding global audience.

**Criseyde’s Afterlives**

If biographies and material texts can be manipulated to suit contemporary environments, it should be no surprise that cultural appropriations reconfigure Chaucerian texts to mirror audience predispositions. This is part of Criseyde’s concern when, in her final speech in Chaucer’s poem, she laments her future literary reception:

Allas, of me, until the worldes ende,
Shal neyther been ywriten nor ysonge
No good word, for thise bokes wol me shende.
O, rolled shal I ben on many a tonge!

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*Chaucer’s verse.*
Throughout the world my belle shal be ronge!
And wommen moost wol haten me of alle.
Allas, that swich a cas me sholde falle!

( TC V , 1058–64)

Just as Criseyde fears, she becomes an object of derision in later literary texts (“bokes” in which “ywriten” one finds “No good word” regarding her). In whatever medium her story will assume (sung or spoken, textual or oral), she predicts a shameful afterlife. Contrary to Criseyde’s own predictions regarding her own literary reception, it is not “wommen [who] wol haten me of all” but rather male poets who cast her most vehemently as a woman of “deshonour” ( TC V , 1066); female artists, in time, emerge to present her more sympathetically. Chaucer himself anticipated the complexity of gendered receptions of “his” Criseyde when his Legend of Good Women narrates the fictional chastisement he receives from the god of Love in response to his act of relating “how that Crisseyde Troylus forsok” ( LGWP G265), and the queen Alceste defends Chaucer for composing his translation of a previous account in “innocence” (G341–45). Although this fictional queen centers the role that men play in relating Criseyde’s story, later women concentrate on Criseyde’s self-perception.

Criseyde’s literary descent into abjection begins as soon as the fifteenth century. The Middle Scots Testament of Cresseid by Robert Henryson (fl. 1460–1500), composed in Chaucerian rhyme royal stanzas, imagines Criseyde’s fortune in the Greek camp once she is “with fleschlie lust sa maculait” [with fleshly lust so stained] ( Testament 81). Forsaken by her Greek lover, Diomede, and condemned by the gods to be deprived of her beauty and to make her way in the world as a leper, she spends her final days “begging fra hous to hous | With Cop and Clapper lyke ane Lazarous” [begging from house to house | with cup and bell like a leper] (342–3). Unlike Chaucer’s Criseyde, Henryson’s Cresseid does not worry that she will be scorned by future women; instead, she offers herself up as “ane mirrour” so that other women might avoid her fate (458). Chaucer’s Criseyde fears that “‘my belle shal be ronge” in the future, and Henryson’s Cresseid transmutes the figurative “belle” as a material “clapper” or sonic instrument that reinforces social stigma.

In the early seventeenth century, William Shakespeare’s Troilus and Cressida (1602) further manipulates audience perceptions of Troilus’s lover. This generically mixed play quickly dispenses with the questions of honor and love that propel Chaucer’s narrative, thrusting the characters instead into a maze of conflicts in which the momentous and the inconsequential commingle. Love becomes bawdry; honor becomes cynicism. With her final words in this play, she offers no hope that any women – “poor our sex,” she bemoans – will avoid her fate, for she finds the “fault” within the inherent “turpitude” of women’s minds ( Troilus V .ii.108). Throughout these premodern male-authored appropriations, Criseyde becomes an emblem of scorn and writers give her little say in how she will be manhandled.

In recent years Criseyde’s fortune has decisively shifted through an increasing number of modern adaptations by women. Alice Shields’s opera in two acts Criseyde (2007) provides a feminist retelling with Chaucer’s poem as her base text. Rather than blame Criseyde’s failure to return to Troy on her unfaithfulness, the opera underscores the violence underlying her imprisonment among the Greeks: once she is raped by Diomede (with the aid of her father, Calkas), Troy is no longer an option. This horrific though sympathetic retelling gives Criseyde the final word, allowing her to address her audience directly and offering her tale up to help the cause of other women.
Francesca Abbate’s *Troy, Unincorporated* (2012) transplants the aftermath of the doomed romance to a sparsely populated township in modern-day Wisconsin, accepting the challenge of a diffuse stylization of lyric affect. Using a mixed style evoking the chaos and disruption of the poem’s narrative, Abbate’s lyric monologues are composed in an array of verse forms that examine and critique both the accepted norms of courtship in the American Midwest, as well as the apparently degraded social forms that replace them. Monologues attributed to Troilus, Pandarus, and Criseyde trace these characters’ inner lives after Criseyde has departed from Troy to live with her ailing father and fall in love with Diomede. In one monologue attributed to Criseyde and rendered in unrhymed couplets, Criseyde is acutely aware of her status as a contested fictional construct: “I didn’t know who I was, we say, | didn’t know what I wanted” (*Troy* 33), and she expresses disappointment in her new life reunited with her father in a monologue of erratic stanzas: “It’s not the story I want. … A commonplace: | The book gone on, | lovely without us” (56). The breakdown of literary form poignantly conveys Criseyde’s realization that a projected future has not taken its proper shape.

Lavinia Greenlaw’s *A Double Sorrow* (2014) initially seems to hew more closely to Chaucer’s text when compared with other recent adaptations. A series of over two hundred seven-line lyric poems formally evoking Chaucer’s rhyme royal stanzas, Greenlaw’s work follows the trajectory of the source legibly enough so that each third-person verse meditation is identified by its corresponding Middle English passage. Criseyde’s lament for her future reputation is condensed from three rhyme royal stanzas in Chaucer’s text into one lyric poem of seven lines titled “Since there is no other way” that ends with this line: “If you’ve heard her name you know what she’s done.” Greenlaw’s poem potentially invites readers to infer that Criseyde’s crime need not be named because it is so well known, but the narrator ultimately suggests that Criseyde’s crime cannot be named because “No one’s sure” (*Double* p. 195). The women whom Chaucer’s Criseyde feared would damn her have become, over the course of literary history, the ones who come forward to suggest the blame might belong elsewhere.

These disparate flashpoints from literary works reworking the narrative exit of Chaucer’s Criseyde show how gendered reception histories complicate the fictional character’s own predicitions regarding her textual future. The strong affect and first-person voice of Chaucer’s Criseyde – “Allas, of me … Allas, that swich a cas me sholde falle!” (*TC* V, 1058–64) is transmuted to that of a woman speaking in the first person as “ane mirrour” (*Testament* 457), or to a cautionary tale for “poor our sex” (*Troilus* V.ii.111), or to a narrator of unspecified gender addressing an audience in the second person: “If you’ve heard her name you know what she’s done” (*Double*, p. 195). These reconfigurations of narrative voice complicate the starkly divergent gendered reception trajectories that Chaucer’s text posits.

**Global Appropriations and Living Chaucers**

As much as these reconceptions might have surprised Criseyde, they would not have surprised Chaucer. We find him repeatedly worrying over unanticipated effects of textual remediation, especially because he writes in an unstable language: “Ye knowe ek that in forme of speche is chaunge | Withinne a thousand yeer, and worde tho | That hadden pris, now wonder nyce and straunge | Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake hem so” (*TC* II, 22–5). This concern carries forward to his postmedieval readers. Edmund Spenser in the sixteenth century noted and capitalized on the archaic feel that Chaucer’s verse had already assumed within the span of 200 years,
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and glossaries and explanatory notes were being added to editions. Alarmed by the accumulating differences by the seventeenth century, Francis Kynaston sought to stabilize the text by translating Chaucer’s Middle English into Latin. His *Amorum Troili et Creseidae* [*The Loves of Troilus and CRESEID*], the poem’s first translation (1635), not only monumentalizes the poem with a dead language, thereby shielding it from the changes to English that Chaucer had predicted, but also confers on *Amorum* the added allures of elegance and polish – poetic graces recognized by Chaucer’s contemporaries but otherwise lost to seventeenth-century readers.15 With its aureate language and classical source material, Kynaston’s translation of Criseyde’s final lament hints at a Babelesque audience: “Oppobrium ero omnium librorum, | Mea menda omnium linguis praedicabatur, | Campana mea per orbem et pulsa datur” [I will be the disgrace in all of the books, | My blemish will be proclaimed by (or in) all tongues, | My bell will be rung throughout the world] (*Amorum* 5, stanza 119, lines 3–5). Chaucer’s Middle English “many a tonge” (*TC V*, 1061) is rendered into an ambiguous “omnia linguis,” which can mean either *all tongues* (organs of speech) or *all languages*. Kynaston’s ambitions might have been to spread Criseyde’s reputation throughout the world; however, his translation was never published abroad.

The world-traveling privileges belong instead to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, extending beyond Becket’s shrine and the cliffs of Dover the pilgrimage that opens its General Prologue:

> Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote  
> The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,  
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour  
> Of which vertu engendred is the flour;  
> Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth  
> Inspired hath in every holt and heeth  
> The tendre croppe, and the yonge sonne  
> Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,  
> And smale foweles maken melodye,  
> That slepen al the nyght with open ye  
> (So priketh hem nature in hir corages),  
> Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,  
> And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,  
> To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;  
> And specially from every shires ende  
> Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,  
> The hooly blisful martir for to seke,  
> That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.  
> (GP 1–18)

These opening lines are among the most famous in English literary history. For many readers, they represent a proud moment of memorization as well as the farthest reach they have into the medieval past. The lines establish many of the terms of the *Canterbury Tales*: the framing pilgrimage, the narrating pilgrim, the mix of secular and religious, the fusion of continental traditions with local English ones – all attributes making the *Tales* particularly ripe for appropriation. Most convenient, however, is the pilgrimage framework, allowing for the *Tales* to be read, over the centuries, in several ways. Generally, the readings range along a continuum with an emphasis on the individual tales at one end and an emphasis on the dramatic interactions of the pilgrims at the other. So complex are the relationships between the pilgrim narrator and the
pilgrimage he recounts, the other pilgrims and the tales each one relates, the pilgrims with each other, and the pilgrims with the purported purposes of their endeavor—just why “toward Caunterbury wolden [they] ryde” (GP 27)?—that the Canterbury Tales has been appropriated over the centuries in order to be all things to all readers.

Preparation for the global travels of the Canterbury Tales began at home in Britain where early in the fifteenth century Chaucer’s sophisticated poetry was appropriated by his literary heirs as the benchmark for English poets. At the same time, his apparently incomplete work invited repeated efforts to complete the pilgrimage with additional tales. Whereas the Tales end with the city of Canterbury in sight, the anonymous Prologue to the Tale of Beryn takes the pilgrims to Becket’s shrine, and John Lydgate’s Siege of Thebes returns them toward Southwark. Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene (1596) continues the Squire’s interrupted tale in a deliberately archaic language. For 200 years, poets and scribes indulged the temptation to finish what Chaucer’s death seemed to have left undone.

By the time John Dryden identified the Canterbury pilgrims as “our Fore‐fathers and Great Grand‐dames” in 1700, Chaucer’s language placed him and his verse in an unreachable past. It became Dryden’s task to bring them forward into the eighteenth century. Although many of the Canterbury figures—the “Moncks, and Fryars, and Chanons, and Lady Abbesses, and Nuns”—had been driven from the English landscape, Dryden argued they merited continued attention because “their general Characters are still remaining in Mankind, … [f]or Mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of Nature, tho’ every thing is alter’d.” For Dryden, Chaucer’s pilgrims had come to represent all the men and women not only of England but also of humanity. Chaucer thus merited Dryden’s modernizing translation.

Soon, Chaucer’s verse travelled to British colonies, working both to validate English values as well as contribute to the imperial project by making the English language and its literature the standard for entry into the educated classes. As early as Puritan New England, Cotton Mather was looking to Chaucer as an authoritative source for “new world religious reform.” In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, repeatedly updated and frequently modernized Chaucerian texts were transformed to appeal to Anglophone readers; frequently stripped of verse and rendered into prose, they eliminated much of the medieval text’s bawdy, its ambiguity and its distinctly medieval flavor. By the mid‐nineteenth century, the Canterbury Tales were among the Early English Text Society volumes stocking the British Empire’s libraries and schools and appeared, it seems, in Indian colonial school curricula 50 years before reaching England’s. Students in British colonial schools often encountered recontextualized excerpts, and adults carried anthologies and pocket volumes featuring Chaucerian selections, most notably tidbits from the Tales, the lyric “Truth” with its concise maxims, the faux‐Chaucerian Floure and the Leaf with its vision of female passivity, and the General Prologue’s portrait collection peopled with eccentrically English characters serving as universal types. To make Chaucer compatible with the prevailing ethos that connected language, patriotism, and morality, editions retaining the Middle English original included glosses pointing away from scurrilous elements whereas modernizing English translations handled the problem through more misdirection and omission.

Guided by introductory notes appended to the Tales, readers could find a pattern of discordant voices being displaced by an aesthetic celebration of English order, a displacement especially congenial to those who would invent and teach a canon of English poetry that set Chaucer at its source. Though some readers could have been intrigued by the perceived social practices or belief systems of exotic “Surryen” Muslims in the Man of Law’s Tale (MLT 153) or Mongols “of Tartarye” in the Squire’s Tale (SqT 9), nineteenth‐century editions of Chaucer’s Tales present carefully
chosen and skillfully glossed pilgrims refashioned as earnest exemplars of sturdy middle-class values and British fortitude – qualities England meant to inculcate in those it conquered and colonized. From the tales themselves, Chaucerian excerpts offered not a reservoir of foreign perspectives or alien cultural values but static exemplary matter providing moral and patriotic edification: from the Prioress’s Tale one learned devotion to family; from the Knight’s Tale, martial duty. In these ways, the Tales contributed to England’s efforts to establish itself as the cultural norm by which all other literary and cultural artefacts must be judged. And after the British Empire had dwindled, Chaucer’s tales remained behind.

The Canterbury Tales have been subjected to centuries of translation, modernization, adaptation, bowdlerization, and downright misrepresentation, all in the name of making this iconic text accessible and useful to contemporary readers. Paradoxically, it is this well-established pattern within the Anglophone tradition of amending and reframing Chaucer’s verse that has provided the model for non-Anglophone translations and adaptations: Chaucer’s linguistic and cultural alterity demands intervention. Not only do Chaucer’s non-Anglophone adapters need to reconceive his tales in another language for a non-English culture, they also do not necessarily owe any allegiance to British values and cultural norms. They are free to amend his tales to suit their own purposes.

A distinctive set of recent adaptations by women of the African diaspora – Karen King-Arabisala’s Kicking Tongues (1988), Gloria Naylor’s Bailey’s Café (1992), Jean “Binta” Breeze’s “The Wife of Bath Speaks in Brixton Market” (2000), Marilyn Nelson’s Cachoeira Tales (2005), and Patience Agbabi’s Telling Tales (2014) – explore the tangled exchange between Eurocentric cultural norms and the “quest for black identities.” By transforming the fourteenth-century tale-telling pilgrimage into a modern vehicle for voices historically sidelined by Chaucerian academic guardians, these award-winning authors leverage Chaucer’s canonical status to create platforms for multiethnic men and women as well as immensely popular genres such as dubstep, hip-hop, jazz, rap, spoken word poetry, and oral traditions incorporating African cultural influences. Such artistic appropriations reroute the Chaucerian tradition from the colonial violence it was made to serve in previous generations. We see such a gesture near the end of Nelson’s Cachoeira Tales. Having reached their destination in a “reverse diaspora” to a convent in Cachoeira, “an old town of colonial buildings,” these pilgrims realize there is no return to a pure past. Inside the Brazilian convent’s chapel, the narrator pauses before a statue and wonders

Was it Mary, or was it Yemanja  
in the chapel, blue-robed, over the altar?  
Was it Mary on the glass-enclosed bier,  
her blue robe gold-embroidered, pearls in her hair,  
or was it the Orixa of the sea?  

(Cachoeira 50)

Behind the convent’s soft melding of Christianity’s Mother of God and the Afro-Brazilian mother goddess of the ocean is the violence of conquest, colonialism, and slavery, a violence the narrator maintains in the bodies of her band of pilgrims: “visiting rich American descendants of slaves” (Cachoeira 50). For such authors, the Chaucerian pilgrimage, with its ability to incorporate and hear diverse voices, needs no redemption.

Reading Chaucer in translation immerses the reader in multiple, layered temporalities: the past of the British Middle Ages, the present of a new cultural milieu, and the past of a non-British medieval culture recalled (or perhaps created for the first time if the receiving
language does not have a comparable or contemporaneous “middle” period) through a translator’s archaisms. Translations make a text that is distant geographically, temporally, and linguistically become resonant in a new place, time, and language. Although translations can be (and often are) a continuation of Britain’s imperial project, they can also enable postcolonial and other emergent literary cultures to shape the “father” of English literature into a shared cultural repository, thereby placing themselves, their culture, and their language as wellsprings of stories and artistic forms. When these translators travel back six centuries, across continents and oceans, they “touch the past” with an intimacy unsurpassed by other readers. Translation completes an affective circuit with Chaucer and allows the translations to say what they think Chaucer would have said if he were a modern Iranian or modern Czech, thereby turning themselves into linguistic necromancers, bringing Chaucer back to life via translations.

These translators reveal multiple Chaucerian voices, each with a different perspective on what it means to collaborate with Chaucer in a new language. In some cases, Chaucer’s is the voice of dissent. When John Boje translates the *Canterbury Tales* into Afrikaans, Chaucer’s voice in *’n Keur uit die Pelgrimsverhale van Geoffrey Chaucer* (1989) gains a certain edge inherent in any skeptical observer of Afrikaans culture during the apartheid period. Terms, locutions, and values associated with the very conservative culture of the Reformed Dutch Church (with which the vast majority of Afrikaners were affiliated and which reinforced the South African government’s apartheid policies during the years Boje translated most of the *Tales*) provide a useful linguistic cluster around which Boje develops the less favorable characters. He does so either among the pilgrims or within their tales, thereby using the Afrikaans language and cultural values to critique those values. A similar dissenting voice emerges when Iranian translator Alireza Mahdipour renders the *Tales* in Farsi verse. By appropriating the stance of the Chaucerian pilgrim who abrogates responsibility for the tales’ message (“My wit is dull, and failing is my lauding tongue”) – Mahdipour acerbically appraises the conservative government’s mismanagement and misunderstanding of the values it claims to control and interpret.

In other cases, the Chaucerian voice manifests through archaisms or colloquial registers. Nazmi Ağıl’s Turkish *Canterbury Hikâyeleri* (1994) domesticates Chaucer’s text with Turkish oral folktales and idioms he heard from his grandfather and on the radio. By reimagining Chaucer’s Christian voice as an old-fashioned Islamic one, he creates a text sympathetic to contemporary Turks. In a 1983 printing of his complete prose translation of the *Tales*, Chinese translator Fang Chong (方重) presents the “nyght-spel” warding off evil spirits in the Miller’s Tale as a passage set off as verse and rendered in a typeface typically reserved for classical Chinese poetry. Another compelling strategy for balancing stylistic archaism and vernacular familiarity is through regional varieties of speech. For instance, José Francisco Botelho’s Chaucerian voice speaks a Brazilian Portuguese associated with the south of his country, far from the urban modernity of São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, and where the old *cavalheiro* of the pampas still sits around telling tales and dispensing wisdom. *Contos da Cantuária* (2013) combines well-known proverbs, *decaislabo* (a traditional Portuguese verse form), *rima toante* (a low-status rhyme scheme), and *pajada* (oral poetry from southern Brazil) to create a new language for conveying Brazil’s fictional Middle Ages. Study of these translations allows us to consider what happens to Chaucer’s voice when a new cultural and linguistic setting deprives the canonical text of its cultural underpinnings.

In such ways, non-Anglophone appropriations enlarge our sense of who has something valuable to say about Chaucer and his texts. Rather than limiting our sources of knowledge to
English-speaking academics, we can also listen to translators, artists, performers, and popularizers. They remind us that just as Chaucer and the culture he inhabited were not unified or singular, the same is true for his subsequent readers, divided as they are by gender, class, ethnicities, nationalities, and language. Both scholarly research methods and creative approaches are varied and disparate, yet all these endeavors provide new interpretative contexts for a simultaneously alien and familiar poet. It seems that the way we understand Chaucer has less to do with our knowledge of Chaucer and more to do with the many cultures, languages, places, and communities we inhabit. Chaucerian afterlives not only sustain ongoing processes of literary transmission but also lay the groundwork for manifold futures.

See also chapters on Biography, Ethnicity, Language, Narrative, Pilgrimage and Travel, Style, Texts, Translation.

**Notes**


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