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**Canterbury Trails: Walking with Immigrants, Refugees, and the Man of Law**

My large, state university has a diverse population, not only of race and ethnicity — Hispanic, African American, Native American, Middle Eastern, Eastern European, African — but also of age; any class has a range of students from traditional college age to older students who are changing careers or finally have the resources to complete a degree. These students have a variety of educational backgrounds: public, parochial, homeschooled, and the unsystematic learning some of our refugees had before they were set in flight. My classrooms usually include at least one veteran, and many students are parents. They are from big cities and also from rural areas and Native American reservations. Adding to this cultural diversity is the fact that I teach in an English department that offers a variety of majors and minors: literature, creative writing, linguistics, elementary and secondary teacher education, and film studies. Every semester I teach to these students at least one section of a required course that includes *Canterbury Tales*.

Those students who have had high-school language arts instruction in English know something of medieval literature. They know of Beowulf and certainly King Arthur, but really their perceptions of these characters are formed by video games or
movies, variously presented according to the aesthetics and concerns of medievalisms such as *Games of Thrones* and *Lord of the Rings*. Fewer have heard of Chaucer and even fewer have any connection to *Canterbury Tales*. It is a joy to introduce them to some portion of Chaucer's monumental cast of characters and his critique of power and personality. Some of the time, however, this work of literature can feel dispensable for students who have much to cover in many areas in order to graduate, and it is especially opaque and intimidating to those from other countries and cultural backgrounds. But in the past two years I have had real success impressing them with the relevance and importance of Chaucer's great project through the tale told by the Man of Law. Students are emotionally affected by friendless Custance, who is involuntarily propelled from one hostile environment to another by impersonal waves of exile and rejection. Her story hits all students as a metaphor of social and geographic isolation, but to some her circumstances are personal. Immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers understand Custance's predicament as literal, and they find that this protagonist from another age and an unfamiliar culture validates and mitigates the loneliness, disassociation, fear, and shame of migration.

What I present in this article are ways I have engaged students in the details and themes of "The Man of Law's Tale" by reading it alongside contemporary narratives that emphasize the ways Custance represents and evokes the displaced and powerless. Here I present four examples. First, the unexpected reactions of students in the university classroom who saw their experience in Custance's odyssey. Second, the reinterpretation of Chaucer's work in *Refugee Tales*, a collection of poems published in 2015 as a companion to the "Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees," a
protest march along the traditional pilgrimage route to Canterbury. The book and event use Chaucer's canonical framework to bring awareness to the ill treatment of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom and is a multi-cultural text that our secondary-education students can use in their future classrooms.

Written by celebrated poets from their interviews with asylees and others, this poetic collection commemorates the "Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees (from Dover to Crawley via Canterbury)," a march to heighten public awareness of the need for reform of immigrant detention practices in the UK. The Walk follows the medieval pilgrimage route from Hampshire to Canterbury, stopping at important junctures for a public telling of two tales: one from an asylum seeker, immigration detainee, or refugee and the other by a person who works with asylees. Overtly modeled on Canterbury Tales, these poems are popular with students.
In addition, I discuss the effectiveness of juxtaposing the tale with a present-day court case. My case study for this method is a discussion of a federal prosecutor's reaction to the tale; she connected it to a human trafficking case, demonstrating that Custance's legal vulnerability in a medieval fiction is reality for young women across the globe. And finally, I discuss the value of having students read the tale in terms of the story of a Honduran boy's harrowing attempts to reach America, the topic of Sonia Nazario's Pulitzer-Prize-winning book *Enrique's Journey.*

This exploration has evolved into what is for me an effective way of teaching the medieval text, helping students discover and comprehend Chaucer's moving characterization of a helpless, displaced, castaway by setting her in relief against present-day analogues. This treatment of "The Man of Law's Tale" becomes its own sort of frame tale. We begin with the tale, consider a number of contemporary narratives that "quyte" (match, compliment, and complement) it and each other, and return to the medieval setting with new appreciation for Chaucer's character and her circumstances. Placing her story in the context of 21st-century refugee culture enacts Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's concept of "hybridized temporality," which argues that while we organize human history into periods, these are arbitrary and relative. Layers of trends, events, experiences, and material culture co-exist to form everyday reality, and a rigid model of time, where one era is perceived to conclude and improve on another, implies that the past has no relevance to the present. Thus as Cohen states, periodization "denies the possibility that traumas, exclusions, violences enacted centuries ago might still linger in contemporary identity formations; it also closes off the possibility that this past could be multiple and valuable enough to contain (and be contained within) alternative presents and futures."
In this article I explain the relevance of "The Man of Law's Tale" not just to my students, but also to a wider reading community, demonstrating the connection of "traumas, exclusions, violences enacted centuries ago" to current events and the resonance of the medieval "period" in the contemporary classroom. Custance bears uncanny resemblance to the migrants who populate our daily newsfeeds and to many students who are finding their way in a new country.

The Postcolonial Medieval Classroom

Quickly summarized, the plot of the Man of Law's long narrative in rhyme royal begins when merchants "sell" to the Sultan of Syria their stories of a captivating girl named Custance, daughter of a Roman emperor. The Sultan barters with the emperor for her hand, and soon she is sent to Syria for the wedding. The Sultan's mother perceives Christian Custance to be a religious and political threat and has the Roman envoy murdered before the ceremony. Rescued by a well-wisher who puts her to sea in a tiny boat, Custance floats across the Mediterranean and north through the Atlantic until she lands on a lonely beach in Northumberland, where she is taken in by a constable and his wife but pursued by "a yong knight . . . hoote of foul affeccioun" (a young man hot with foul affection) who would make her his lover (585-86).³ She rejects him, and he finds revenge in murdering the constable's wife and framing Custance for the crime. God intervenes in her trial, she is exonerated, and the lord of the land, Alla, marries her, but unfortunately his mother, Donegild, also finds Custance threatening. Soon our heroine is forced back into her tiny boat, this time with a son, floating until she is fished out of the Mediterranean by a senator who has just conquered the Syrians in retaliation for the
assassinations at the Syrian wedding. Her father welcomes her home, her husband arrives from the north, and their son, Maurice, becomes king.

This first time I included the Man of Law, I expected the students to receive his story as a longwinded, moral exemplum on why European Christians deserve divine grace and other peoples do not. I was also prepared for them to find the plot disjointed and the protagonist flat and to perceive it as bizarre and "medieval" in the sense of ancient and inaccessible, having no relationship to the present day. To the contrary, the exact students whom I presumed would find the tale particularly inaccessible -- students who are recent immigrants or first-generation Americans and feel excluded and judged by Western canonical culture -- found in Custance's peripatetic suffering a natural analogue to their stories of displacement and injustice. Whereas I thought of the plot as a bit bizarre, they saw Custance's experiences as obvious, the same old hackneyed narrative of a girl at the mercy of smugglers who abandon her in another country where she cannot speak the language.

The initial wave of discussion focused on the fantasy of the ending, which provides for the reunion of Custance with her father in their homeland. Custance's child lives and is not separated from her, and the story posits a self-aware, remorseful husband who finds her, begs her forgiveness, and stays with her. During her long ordeal, no man succeeds in forcing her to have sex, not the Sultan of her arranged marriage (he is murdered before the nuptials) nor two potential rapists. Even the consummation of her marriage to the lord of Northumberland is in terms that preserve her chaste and saintly aspect as she lays "hir hoolynesse aside"(713) for a brief time in order to conceive a blessed child whom the Pope will make "Emperour of Rome," a perfect elision of church
and state, public and private (1121). Students found it credible that a girl could and would endure a journey from one country to another in a tiny boat only to find herself in court facing a false accusation, but they insisted that she most certainly would not be protected by a compassionate man in a position of authority, and she would mostly certainly not be rescued directly by the hand of God. One student whose parents immigrated from Guatemala wrote that Custance is like many women in the world today, a social outcast with no access to justice except the "fantasy of God's grace." Another first-generation American described the final reunion as "typical immigrant wishful thinking."

In another line of discussion, students specifically compared Custance to immigrants crossing from Mexico into the U.S. and the chase/capture/arrest/deportation narrative common to their plight. While students found great empathy and connection with the fact that Custance's survival relies entirely on strangers — in some cases this plot point inspired touching personal stories of generosity by people and churches along migration routes — most anecdotes were of the vicious extortion of human traffickers on whom so many immigrants must rely. Strangers are menacing. Custance's experiences with both the Northumbrian man who frames her for murder and the steward who attacks her when she runs aground reminded students of the practices of "coyotes" and the stash houses they use for their pollos, or chickens. 

Coyote experiences can go two ways: the smuggler receives his payment and delivers the immigrant as promised, or he steals the money and abuses, abandons, or murders the immigrant. Both of these possibilities are suggested in Chaucer's story. Seeing that Custance's boat contains treasure and that she is helplessly lost and does not speak the language, the Northumberland constable and his
wife could have taken advantage, but they show her mercy instead. But after she is expelled from Northumberland, she lands in the same condition on another shore, and the agent from that castle tries to rape her (911-917).

One Mexican-American student fixated on the "dronkonnesse" of the messenger who is coerced by Donegild, Alla's mother and Custance's mother in law, into taking slanderous accounts of Custance to Alla (771-777). Drunken coyotes who assault women in the stash houses is sadly a familiar trope. Demoralized and malnourished, the rest of the *pollos* do nothing to oppose this behavior. In fact, many women who plan to make the crossing acknowledge the inevitability of rape and start a course of birth control pills before they set out. Unlike Custance, the students note, they have little chance of God intervening to save them, but better than Custance, these women have access to birth control.

A second point of contact students identified between the tale and the politics of immigration was their relief to find that the tale does not glorify or rationalize exodus. Often the narrative of immigration casts these people as materially ambitious, seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Instead, students demand that the situation be discussed in terms of refugees being forced to leave because of deprivation and abuse. At the beginning of "The Man of Law's Tale," it is clear that Custance has no choice but to leave her homeland and separate from her family, her customs, and her language. On the "woful day," she rises and dresses for the journey "For wel she seeth ther is noon oother ende" (261; 266). In subsequent research, I have read stories of women who left their native country to flee abusive husbands who had legal rights to the women's labor, earnings, and bodies. In Colorado alone, there are several websites that list such abuses
suffered by women who make it to our state. One student connected this 14th-century tale to the website Immigrant Stories Project, which features profiles of women fleeing domestic violence and sexist laws only to endure more degradation at the mercy of coyotes and other swindlers and thieves after they arrive in the U.S. As Custance laments, “Wommen are born to thraldom and penance./And to been under mannes governance" (Women are born to slavery and punishment/And to be under man's control) (286-287).

A third point of contact for the students was that Custance demonstrates the commonly held idea, even if subconscious, that the only worthy immigrant is one who is meek and sympathetic. Custance's innocence is a quality of sainthood; that is why she is worthy of God's intercession and the beneficence of strangers. Students see it as perniciously insulting that a human in need can only evoke compassion or respect by complete submission or degradation, and yet this is the image the world prefers. The stereotype of the pious exile at the mercy of a terrifying, soulless world sets up the following opposite: immigrants who do not behave timidly are strange foreigners with backward ideas and slovenly, grasping habits representative of the lawless and inhuman behavior of the corrupt societies from which they are trying to escape. This attitude generates a self-protective anxiety about the changes the immigrants will bring: their own religious rituals; their own ideas of community; and different customs that will displace and undermine those of the established culture. This xenophobia is exactly what the mother of the Sultan expresses when she gathers her loyal followers to help her rid the kingdom of the new influence: "What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe/But thraldom to oure bodies and penance?" (What can we expect from the customs Custance brings with her/except slavery of our bodies and punishment?) (337-38). She plots to murder
Custance and her Roman Catholic entourage in order to "make us sauf for everemoore" (make us safe for evermore) (343). In this model there is no room to accommodate confusion, imperfection, anger, or disagreement. The only acceptable immigrant is one who is humble and pliant, a Custance awaiting rescue from a morally superior benefactor.

In his book *Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature*, Jonathan Hsy argues that Custance is defined by her experiences in "contact zones," those places where languages and customs coexist and clash, such as shores, pilgrimage routes, marketplaces, and jails. She is an exile, a "wrecce" or wretched woman, who lands time and again on forbidding shores where she does not know a soul and cannot communicate. Large urban campuses such as mine can also be seen as a "contact zone" for first-generation immigrants, recent immigrants, and refugees, which has much to do with why the story resonated with them. Students instantly identified the episodes of Custance's journey as the familiar itinerary of the exiled and abused political asylee, and they were sympathetic to her linguistic displacement, not just because of their own experiences with English as a non-native tongue, but also because the entire class reads the story in Middle English, a practice that creates a unifying *esprit de corps*.

Although initially frustrated with the language barrier, students get their feet under them soon enough, and no matter what or how many languages each student has, no one is familiar with this one; the mutual stumbling around allows students to explore meaning and interpretation without as much fear of missing a point everyone else gets. Also I require them to memorize the first 18 lines of the "General Prologue," and I have noticed that Spanish-speakers or French-speaking Africans find it easier to accomplish than many native English speakers. After the Middle Ages, English experienced vowel
shifts that the Romance languages did not; therefore, the Romance-language speakers find the vowel pronunciation and phonetic meter quite natural. These recitations highlight the artistic sound of the poetry.

Thus even though this canonical literature has its genesis in a white European, English-speaking past, it has proved relevant to the wider population of this academic contact zone. Like Chaucer's imaginative community of characters, telling their stories within the greater architecture of the frame tale, the classroom itself is a frame in which students from different places and backgrounds share their points of view as they explore the 14th-century text in a language foreign to them all.

**Refugee Trails**

The experience of immigrants in a contact zone is much like the gathering of unlikely companions at the Tabard Inn in London, a border station between everyday life and an unfamiliar and insecure expedition, through which they expect to better their futures and their souls. For the duration of the narrative, they are a displaced people among strangers on an unfamiliar route, which brings out their survival instincts: the Pardoner is predatory, nearly succeeding in tricking the group into buying his fake indulgences; the Miller aggressively bullies the Reeve; and the Wyf of Bathe is immediately defensive, offering justifications for her life choices without any overt provocation. The story of Custance reflects this acute anxiety of displacement, as she is an alien in dangerous and untrustworthy foreign settings. The attitudes and presentation of the medieval pilgrimage and the modern-day refugee are connected.
As I was exploring this line of thinking, I had the good fortune to meet Patience Agbabi, a poet and activist from the United Kingdom who uses her art and voice to bring awareness to the inequities and degradation experienced by asylum seekers in her country. In June of 2015 and again in June 2016, she participated in an event called the "Walk in Solidarity with Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Detainees (from Dover to Crawley via Canterbury)," the goals of which were public awareness of the suffering of dispossessed migrants and the need for reform of immigrant detention practices. The Walk followed the medieval pilgrimage route from Hampshire to Canterbury, stopping at important junctures for a public telling of two tales: one from an asylum seeker, former immigration detainee, or refugee and the other by a person who works with asylees. The poem Agbabi wrote for her public reading is called "The Refugee's Tale," a first-person account of a Coptic Christian Egyptian named Farida, a banking clerk and mother of two grown children, whose middle-class life was upended during the Arab Spring. As the new regime came into power, she was demonized for her religious beliefs, harassed by the state, and targeted by an arsonist intending to murder her family. Her husband was arrested for no given reason, and when he was finally released, the two of them fled the country and applied for asylum in Croyden, England.

Agbabi interviewed Farida and then crafted the transcript into a poem, emphasizing her subject's depression, described as a "bulletproof jacket" of "heavy black and steel." It also expresses hope found in having her experience recorded in a story that will be shared with others:

But good people come, who open me to feel again for others; and as I translate the words of a refugee life to a form, I begin to heal. Their voice is my own voice striking a chord.
May our truth conquer fear: 
maybe the real story begins here.

Agbabi concludes the poem with these lines:

I thought I forget but some things you never forget: 
the day they imprison my husband, he is not eating; 
the heavy black and steel of my bulletproof jacket 
when I met him at the airport broken, bleeding. 
The story ends where you put the frame: 
but however it begins, remember my name.¹⁰

Agbabi "puts the "frame" of Farida's story in an urgently sympathetic and hopeful present, 
and she differentiates and personalizes a refugee in a time when it is easy for migrant 
faces to aggregate into one depersonalized, alien countenance. Agbabi's continued public 
readings of the poem ensure that although dispossessed and expatriated, Farida has not 
lost her identity; she has her "real story" and her name.¹⁰

David Herd, the Walk organizer, published Agbabi's poem and 14 others in a 
collection called Refugee Tales. The voices of asylum seekers and immigration 
detainees came through in "The Unaccompanied Minor's Tale" and "The Deportee's 
Tale." People who work with asylum seekers are represented by “The Interpreter's Tale" 
and "The Chaplain's Tale." This deliberate repurposing of Canterbury Tales reminds us 
that a revered, canonical symbol of centuries-old, traditional national identity can also 
serve as a manifesto of new pilgrims seeking sanctuary and help. Each poet's rendering 
of an immigrant's testimony proves that there is not one model of experience, no uniform 
migrant story, and no single perspective on their circumstance. We see this in Chaucer's 
Custance who is simultaneously the paragon of one culture and the scourge of another. 
In her native community, Custance has magnificent potential. The blazon of her virtues 
— virtue, courtesy, holiness, beauty without pride, youth without folly — is extolled by
every Roman man and impresses the visiting merchants. In addition, "humblesse hath slayn in hire al tirannye" (humility has extinguished in her all tyranny) (165). She has no potential for oppressing another human being. She is the model of social inclusion. Only one stanza later, the geography and perspective shift. The Sultan of Syria regards the merchants as coming from a "strange place" (178) and is enchanted by the description by the exotic, alien creature they describe. In her native polity, she is the highest order of person, but traded into a different culture with a different religion and rule of law, she is the Other: threatening, destabilizing, and subversive. The Sultan desires her as a rare trophy, and his mother and fellows see her as a devious invader.

Students observe that despite these two powerful, well defined theocracies between which she travels, Custance's personal world is one of anarchy. She exists in the margins praying to her God. In that shadow space, there is confusion about which laws apply or if any apply, much like the international airports after President Trump's January 2017 executive order that banned travel into the United States by immigrants and refugees from seven predominantly Muslim countries.\(^{11}\)

Much like Agbabi's Farida, a Coptic Christian driven out of her native Egypt, Custance’s departure from Rome is presented in the language of banishment: she is "sent to a strange nacioun" without any friends "to be bounden under subjeccioun" (268-270), exiled to a "Barbre nacioun" (pagan world) (281) outside of her known culture. This motif of expatriation is echoed later in pagan Northumberland when we hear of the Christians who are "exiled" (547) in Wales. Reading "The Man of Law's Tale" alongside Refugee Tales helps students to understand and appreciate the medieval text and its social and political messages. And it helps immigrant students value their own historical stories,
which may be all they have left in a new country that disregards their native language and customs. Another benefit is the rich conversation on poetics generated by contrasting Chaucer's Middle English rhyme royal with the styles and forms of the poems in Herd's book, which are written by award-winning poets with wide reputations. It is worth noting here that Agbabi also shows her dynamic and engaging skills in *Telling Tales*, a volume that re-imagines Chaucer's pilgrims as contemporary citizens in a multi-cultural, multi-dialectical Britain.

**Immigrant Trials**

As I indicated in my introduction, I have collected other stories inspired by readings of "The Man of Law's Tale," and I bring those into the classroom to add further dimension to our reading of the medieval text. Since the tale generated so much conversation from students about immigration, and because Chaucer assigned his tale to a Man of Law, I asked an Assistant U.S. Attorney who used to be counsel for Homeland Security if she would read it.\(^{12}\) She did and then made a powerful connection to the 2013 federal prosecution of a Denver man called Kizzy Kalu, who was convicted on 89 counts of mail fraud, visa fraud, human trafficking, and money laundering. Kalu's scheme was luring trained nurses from the Philippines to Denver with promises of high-paying jobs as nursing instructors at Adam University in Denver. He advertised the positions on a website, promising that the University would supply visas and pay for travel. While Kalu did obtain H-1B visas for nurse instructor supervisors, considered under U.S. immigration law a specialty occupation, he entirely invented Adam University.\(^{13}\) Instead of working as nursing instructor supervisors at an institution of higher learning, the
women were farmed out as low-paid employees of nursing homes and long-term-care facilities. The facilities paid their wages to Kalu's company, Foreign Healthcare Professionals Group, and he pocketed 40% of the money the nurses earned. As time passed, he had them find their own jobs and extorted them for a large portion of their wages. Kalu threatened to turn them into Homeland Security, holding them hostage through their dread of prosecution, deportation, and worse.

There are many connections between "The Man of Law's Tale" and this woman of law's case, such as the obvious comparisons of Custance's vulnerability and victimization by men in positions of power. But sadly the prosecutor had seen that abuse so many times, it did not stand out for comment. Her real point of departure was the scene where Custance is cast on shore "fer in Northhumberlond" (508) and taken under the care of a constable from the castle, or keep, the place where Custance first finds safety and shelter but later is framed and tried for the murder of her new friend Hermengyld. This medieval castle reminded the prosecutor of the building Kalu used to represent his false university, a late-19th-century red-brick Victorian on a hill just north of downtown Denver. It has a tall, pointed tower, gables over gothic windows, and large lawns. To the unsuspecting Filipinas, it looked like a venerable European institution of higher learning and represented authority, safety, and an opportunity to be among sage and estimable academics.
Just as Custance believes she has found security in the constable's fortified keep, they were fooled by the emblem of civilization and unable to anticipate the dire events to come.

In the Northumbrian castle, Custance endures a private and then a public trial of her virtue. First, she rebuffs the unwanted sexual advances of a "yong knight" possessed by Satan. In revenge, he murders Hermengyld, leaving the bloody knife in a way that implicates Custance. Her trial for murder includes sympathetic friends who "baar witnesse" to Custance's kindness and sanctity through an examination of "motyf" and eyewitness testimony, and yet there is a near miscarriage of justice but for the
intervention of God. When the Northumbrian King Alla makes the knight swear his innocence on the gospel, "An hand hym smoot upon the nekke-boon,/ That doun he fil atones as a stoon,/ And bothe his eyen broste out of his face/ In sighte of every body in that place." (A hand struck him on the neck/ and down he fell at once like a stone./ Both his eyes burst out of his face/ in sight of everyone there.) (669-672). After striking down the murderer, God speaks: "A voys was herd in general audience,/ And seyde, 'Thou has desclaundred, giltelees,/ The doghter of hooly chirche in heigh presence;/ Thus hastou doon, and yet holde I my pees!'" (A voice was heard by the audience/ and said, 'You have slandered a guiltless person,/ the daughter of this holy church in the presence of the divine./ This you have done, and now I hold my peace.) (673-76). Later in the story, Custance lands near another dangerous castle, out of which comes the "lordes styward" who tries to make her his lover "wher-so she wolde or nolde" (917), another demonstration of the perpetual threat of rape. She has divine protection in this instance as well.

God did not speak in the trial of the Filipina nurses. Although Kalu was punished, it was by a government that did not recognize his victims as citizens. Kalu's crimes were against the people of the United States, and for these he was sentenced to almost 11 years in federal prison, three years of supervised release, and $3.8 million in restitution. This amount constituted the total amount of wages he stole from all of the women he had extorted over time. But he has no money, and the nurses have disappeared deep into the community to avoid deportation. They are Custances sent to a strange nation "to be bounden under subjeccioun/of oon, she knoweth not his condicioun" (bound under the subjugation of someone/ without knowing anything about him.) (270-71).
The case of Kizzy Kalu is an excellent springboard back into the Chaucerian world of the kangaroo court and subjective justice. Consider the confusion of guilt and innocence in Custance's murder trial. The insider, the knight, "has this tresoun wroght" (has done a treasonous act) (619). The outsider, Custance, is virtuous and falsely accused. This construct does not follow expected nativist lines: native equals good/ alien equals bad. And while Alla provides for a kind of justice, "oure justise," which includes swearing on the gospel and invoking God's intercession, students recognize and comment on the fact that his justice is one that excludes non-Christians, a hot topic in the context of religious conflict in today's world. While this particular court case may not be as relevant in classrooms in other regions of the U.S. and the world, it is a sad truth that an instructor will not have a difficult time finding a similar human-trafficking or deportation prosecution to use alongside the medieval story in order to highlight Chaucer's examination of the qualities of justice.

Enrique's Journey
I gave "The Man of Law's Tale" to another unlikely reader, an anthropologist who teaches in our Chicano/a Studies program. His immediate response was to hand me a copy of a book he regularly teaches in many of his courses: Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey*. In writing a series on immigration for the *Los Angeles Times*, Nazario learned that it is common for Central American refugees to travel to the U.S. by "train surfing" or freight hopping, riding on the tops and hanging off of the sides of cargo trains that move north through Mexico. In addition to the inherent and often lethal perils of clinging to a fast-moving train, there are other vicious threats: the ad hoc community of
hitchhikers is lawless and brutally competitive, and the riders are also subject to abuse by bandits, townspeople, and *la migra*, the migrant police. But most striking to Nazario was the fact that many of these migrants are children and teenagers. In 2003, she spent several months riding the trains herself and met Enrique, a refugee from Honduras.

When Enrique was five, his mother illegally migrated from Honduras to the U.S. to find work to support Enrique and his sister. By the time he was 16, he had been shifted from relative to relative, shack to shack and had little to do with his time but sniff glue and grieve the dissolution of his family. He decided to leave in search of his mother. Crossing through Guatemala and swimming the River Suchiate were difficult but doable. The real challenge was surviving the various states of Mexico. Seven times he was arrested by the Mexican migration police and sent back over the river to Guatemala. Once he was beaten by a train gang, stripped, and left to die beside the tracks, but stumbled into a village where he found help. It took him four months and thirty train rides just to get to Mexico City, where he encountered more danger and violence until he found a *patero* (from *pato*, the Spanish word for duck), a type of smuggler who is paid to help immigrants swim across the Rio Grande. Enrique worked washing cars until he could pay that *patero*, and when he arrived on the opposite shore, he was met by a coyote his mother had paid to find him.

The danger and unpredictability of expatriation is an important theme brought up by juxtaposing Nazario's journalism and Chaucer's medieval tale. Chaucer provides some protection for Custance in that God, Christ, and the Mother Mary intercede for her, and certainly Enrique would have died were it not for strangers who cared for him along the way in the name of the same Catholic divinities, especially the people of the Mexican
State of Vera Cruz, who have made it part of their religious and social mission to provide for the train riders. A name the stowaways have for the Mexican train is *El Tren Peregrino*, both the train for pilgrims and of pilgrims, a not-too-distant echo of *Canterbury Tales* and the purpose of a pilgrimage, which is to imitate the passion of Christ and reinforce the ideal that suffering is rewarded with grace. Another name is *El Caballo de Hierro*, The Iron Horse, evocative of the mounted Tabard travelers on their journey. These nicknames are inspiring. Initially, Nazario writes, "Enrique is struck by the magic of the train -- its power and its ability to take him to his mother" (71).

But the train has other names that subvert both the Christian message of redemption and the magic of adventure. It is also *El Tren de la Muerte*, The Train of Death, for its obvious relationship to the deaths and mutilations that happen around it, on it, and because of it. In its less reliable aspect it is *El Gusano de Hierro*, The Iron Worm, which "squeaks, groans, and clanks -- black tankers, rust-colored boxcars, and gray hoppers winding north on a single track that parallels the Pacific coast" (82). Connotations of *gusano* include maggot and also someone who betrays another, a snitch, and the train enacts this treachery. Migrants in open cars are sometimes smashed by the moving contents inside. Those in boxcars can get locked in by coyotes or gang members and dehydrate and die in the suffocating heat. Those who are too slow when they jump for the train lose their legs under its wheels. Others may manage to board but are swept off by a tree branch or thrown from the top by gangsters.

Who drives the train? From Enrique's point of view, no one, or maybe a hostile Fate. It surges on dispassionately, without any notice of its stowaways. I kept waiting for stories of a passenger, conductor, or company official who might interact, positively or
negatively, with the illegal but ever-present hitchhikers. We know there must be such people on board; yet according to Enrique's narrative, these appearances are few. The riders do not express any expectation that the crew will provide assistance, nor do they present the crew as a punitive force. From the migrants' perspective, the train is self-inspired and self-propelled, an untrustworthy, hostile mythological creature that accepts the inevitability of the people clinging to its tops and sides like an animal tolerates parasites. Its movement is continuous and inexorable. If in running to catch the train a boy is too slow, "the ladder will yank him forward and send him sprawling. Then the front wheels, or the back ones, could take an arm, a leg, perhaps his life. 'Se lo comio el tren,' other migrants will say. The train ate him up." (67).

Ladders yank. Wheels take limbs. The train eats, speeds up, slows down, surges forward, and squeezes through dark tunnels. It maims. "The train ripped out my eye," laments one migrant (72). In yet more examples of middle voice, the train "hugs a hillside" (124), and it "changes crews." (122). After Enrique manages to get through Chiapas, a notoriously lawless and terrifying state, the migrants no longer "talk of The Pilgrim's Train or of The Iron Horse. They have another name for the train: El Tren Devorador. The Train That Devours" (88). The train has the impersonal aspect of unrelenting, dispassionate brutality.

This account of an Honduran teenager stands as an analogue to the story of Custance, propelled through the Mediterranean and the Atlantic by the wild waves: "the wilde wawes wol hire dryve/Unto the place ther she shal arryve" (the wild waves will drive her/ Unto the places where she shall arrive) (468-69). While she "dryveth forth into oure occian/Thurghout oure wilde see" (drives forth into our ocean through our wild sea)
(505-06), she has no power to propel the ship, and this lack of agency is reflected in Chaucer's use of the waves "casting" her ashore (508).

*Custance at sea in her tiny boat.*

By way of rhetorical questions, the Man of Law provides an explanation for the boat's progress over perilous seas: Who saved Daniel in the horrible cave? (474). Who kept Jonas in the whale until he arrived at Nineveh? (486-87). Who gave Judith courage and hardiness? (939). The answers are God, Christ, and the Mother Mary. They keep her safe and "unwemmed" (undefiled) (924). There are many moments in *Enrique's Journey* that demonstrate how much the migrants and the people who help them believe
in and pray to the Christian God for their safe travel and arrival, but students note how many refugees pray as fervently to the Muslim Alla or the Hebrew God. They find themselves moving quickly from discussions of faith to the realization of how easily an immigrant can be the victim of the randomness of human cruelty and the physical forces of the natural world, such as the scenes where Custance is expelled by Alla's mother and her henchmen and set adrift in geography and time:

Forth gooth hir ship thurghout the narwe mouth
Of Jubaltare and Septe, dryvynge ay
Somtyme west, and somtyme north and south,
And somtyme est, ful many a wery day,

(Her ship goes forth through a narrow mouth
Of Gibraltar and Morocco driving
Sometime west, and sometime north and south,
And sometime east, full many a weary day) (946-949)

As we have seen with recent immigrants who attempt to float from Turkey to Greece, or Libya to Italy, or Haiti to Florida, such aimless drifting is reality. As one student exclaimed, the only divine intervention comes from a reliable coast guard.

Within Chaucer's community of voices, Custance exists as a character least in control of her selfhood. Limited by cultural forces, she can only react by enduring, much the same as the Filipina nurses whom I discussed earlier. Her role as an instrument of negotiation reinforces her lack of agency. Domestically, she is her father's chattel. Economically, she is surety on a contract between Rome and Syria. Politically, she is a hostage traded among foreign households and a deed of trust on new real estate if she can, by her example, convert her new country to Christianity. Enrique is a present-day iteration of this alienation. Like Custance in Syria and Northumbria, he is under the jurisdiction of foreign judges and law enforcement officials who work to deport him.
The image of a vulnerable, powerless boy on a pilgrimage to find his mother can be described in Jeffrey Cohen's formulation as "a little fragment of the medieval lodged in the heart of the postcolonial." Considered side by side, the two narratives concentrate political competition and violent religious histories into the image of one girl in a boat praying to the "hooly croys" (holy cross) (451) and one boy on the roof of a train longing for his mother.

_In Surrye, whilom dwelt . . ._17

To further my inquiry into the relevance of this story in present-day American culture, I had two friends read it: a doctor and a mortgage broker. Both of them immediately assumed the entire exercise was for them to see the current Syrian immigrant crisis in the episode of Custance's life where a civil war forces her into the middle of the Mediterranean without a paddle or life vest. In other words, a scene from a Middle English romance in rhyme royal about an imaginary kingdom in a time far, far away, appeared as if it was written in direct response to current events. Although I have provided a number examples of ways this tale connects the medieval to present-day experience, there is clearly more potential for broader development in the classroom. As I write this, President Trump's executive order banning entry into the United States of people from certain countries including Syria, has reinforced the themes of Chaucer's story. Certainly the connection to the Syrian refugee crisis is direct and compelling. Recently I saw news footage of a woman in a crowd of Syrian refugees, waiting to get across a European border. Her forlorn expression made me think of the following stanza
from "The Man of Law's Tale," which describes Custance in her most alienated moment as she stands trial in a foreign court for a murder she did not commit:

Have ye nat seyn somtyme a pale face,
Among a prees, of hym that hath be lad
Toward his deeth, wher as hym gat no grace,
And swich a colour in his face hath had
Men myghte knowe his face that was bistad
Amonges alle the faces in that route?
So stant Custance, and looketh hire aboute.

(Have you sometimes seen a pale face
In a crowd, of a man who is being led
Toward his death, who has no grace.
And he had such a color on his face
that men might notice that he was troubled
among all the faces in that crowd?
So stood Custance, looking all around.) (645-651)

Just this one stanza of a 600-year-old poem by an author who had seen much in his long and diverse career reveals the way the medieval is reality for a significant part of the world's population. Nativism, competition for resources, colonial claims, and religious war are reflected in immigration and refugee statutes adjudicated in the contact zones of the law courts, the high seas, the wrong side of the tracks, and the classroom.

Connections made between medieval literature and 21st-century events can help us circle back to the original texts with more purpose and interest. In their recently published book *Teaching Literature in the Context of Literacy Instruction*, Jocelyn A. Chadwick and John E. Grassie emphasize the importance and efficacy of using informational and nonfiction texts as a way into unfamiliar literature for English language learners and "for students who may have less familiarity with a time period, theme, setting, or historical context." I consider the contemporary responses and comparisons I have presented to be in this category of informational, nonfiction texts. They are in line
with Chadwick and Grassie's thesis that "if we can make literature relevant not only for us, but for our twenty-first-century students, they will read, will not disconnect what they read in our classes from what they read outside, and will not view reading literature as a chore"(52). 20

Chadwick writes that she often quotes to students from Aristotle's Poetics that great literature moves people to act. Certainly that is true of the way Agbabi and her cohort have engaged Canterbury Tales as a rhetorical structure for their protest, which should not surprise us considering Canterbury Tales is Chaucer's scathing satire of medieval social and religious institutions. At the very least I keep in mind Chadwick's advice that

We should never enter a classroom presupposing what students know, should know, don't know, could never know. Although we may be, and often are, aware of students' class, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other traits, we cannot allow this awareness to interfere with or inhibit their exploration of a work in the canon, even one completely unfamiliar to them. Rather, we must use this awareness to inform how we interact with them and guide us as we choose new texts to help contextualize the canon. When we blend in contemporary texts students never imagined encountering in school, they react with curiosity, questions, and interest and are eager to explore them (86). 21

Blending in "contemporary texts students never imagined encountering in school" in order to engage them and "contextualize the canon" has been the essence of the project I discuss in this article.

One result of this exploration demonstrates the enduring capacity of the frame tale to express a multitude of voices and perspectives; it seeks inclusivity and diversity. I think of my experiment with "The Man of Law's Tale" as a DIY frame tale. We started the Man of Law as our narrator and moved from his story to other examples related to his
I don't expect that any class would include all the examples I write about here. I am only demonstrating the unexpected and fruitful directions my investigation of this method has led me and those students I continue to teach. It has also been an inspiration for those readers in the greater community who were surprised by their interest in a medieval story.

This thought brings me back to *Refugee Tales* and David Herd's "Prologue" in which he states that the Walk and the poetry collection is a "declaration . . . of solidarity" with those who are exiled and suffering. He insists that the process of solidarity and empathy happens when we engage in

. . . the oldest action  
Which is listening to tales  
That other people tell  
Of others  
Told by others  
We set out to make a language  
That opens politics  
Establishes belonging  
Where a person dwells" (v).
Herd emphasizes the importance of storytelling, which "establishes belonging/Where a person dwells." As instructors of medieval literature, we demonstrate the universality of human experience, across continents and across time, by asking uninitiated readers to try out a medieval story, see what connections they make, see where they "dwell" in it, and further, by bringing those observations back into our classrooms for more contemplation and comparison. Certainly this process is in the spirit of Chaucer's great work of literature, in which his alter-ego narrator recites in "best sentence and moost solaas" the tales that other people tell about other people.
4 The stash houses are not for the comfort and protection of the migrants. Since most coyotes are paid for their services by a sponsor upon delivery, these buildings or apartments are holding cells to keep the travelers from running away. It is also common for the coyote to leave the migrants without food and water, taking away their clothes and shoes. Naked and weak, the captives cannot easily escape.
9 Herd, 132.
10 For instance, I was privileged to hear Agbabi read “The Refugee's Tale” at an important and dynamic symposium, "Refuge," organized by Jeffrey Cohen for The George Washington University's Medieval and Early Modern Studies Institute, Washington, D.C., October 28, 2016.
14 These English translations of Spanish are the ones Nazario provides in her book, but there are other dimensions to these terms. An instructor who knows Spanish would find more metaphoric possibility here. For more information about the book and its potential in the classroom, please see the teaching materials at http://www.enriquesjourney.com/educators-
15 English has two voices: active as in *John broke the vase* and passive as in *The vase was broken*. Middle voice is one where the subject acts upon himself or herself reflexively or for his or her own benefit. Technically, English does not have a middle voice; reflexive constructions such as *I wash myself* are not quite the same thing. However, there are constructions that create the effect of middle voice, especially with agents that are grammatically acting on themselves in a way that is metaphoric, e.g., *The casserole cooked for nine hours*. Although this sentence suggests that the casserole is its own cook, we know that a casserole cannot cook itself. So too, the train is personified into an agent independent of a human driver; it drives itself: *The train drove on.*
16 Cohen, 2.
17 The first line of “*The Man of Law’s Tale*,” 134.
18 If we reject the notion that the medieval is entirely separate from the present, it is obvious that the tale leads to U.S. immigration law, work and refugee visa statues, and federal prosecutions. In the “General Prologue,” Chaucer-pilgrim tells us that the Man of Law knows all the cases and laws "and every statue
coude he pleyn by rote," GP 327. His tale demonstrates transgressions of God's law, social law, business law, international law, and the laws of nature as Custance survives an impossible ocean journey.


20 In Chapter 4, "Making Literature Relevant," 61.

21 Chadwick and Grassie, 86. See also their Chapter 5: "Blending the Canon with the New."
Works Cited


