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Borderlands Chaucer

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Abstract

This essay pursues imperfect analogies between Chaucerian poetics and border theory/pedagogy, drawing on the author's experience teaching Chaucer in the US-Mexico Borderlands. It calls for reading Chaucer from the classroom and from the margins, in order best to locate Chaucer and medieval studies in leaner, less canon-driven, and more effectively anti-racist 21st-century curricula.

The first time I taught Chaucer at New Mexico State University (NMSU), a land-grant agricultural school and Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) some forty miles from the US-Mexico Border, I was introducing the linguistic dynamics of late-medieval England when a student interjected, “Hey, that’s just like the Border!”¹ Like Chaucer, my Borderlands students inhabit a complex multilingual world in which boundaries between languages, while serving to reinforce existing power structures, can also be permeable and subject to creative manipulation. In *Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature*, Jonathan Hsy (2013) has invoked Gloria Anzaldúa’s US-Mexico Borderlands as the closest analogue to the multi- and trans-lingual world of Chaucer’s London (199–202). Extending this imperfect analogy,² my *frontizero* students and I have come over the years to read Chaucer as a fourteenth-century borderlands poet: Chaucer, we have found, can speak in compelling ways to our local, contemporary Borderlands because of the late-medieval boundaries—linguistic, cultural, social, eschatological—that he himself was so interested in crossing and blurring. (I use Borderlands to refer to the US-Mexico Border region, and borderlands as a more general term.) This essay argues for the value of pursuing such imperfect analogies between our students’ immediate, local worlds and the late-medieval texts we teach. The point of such analogies, for me, is not to make Chaucer more relatable to students, sparking their interest through connection; for like Anthony Bale (2020), I locate much of the value of teaching the past precisely in its alterity (6, 15). Moreover, such efforts assume some inherent value for students in encountering Chaucer in the first place—precisely the assumption that I think we must interrogate. What value? For whom? And how is it created? Rather, I want to argue, pursuing and critiquing analogies between past and present can help students understand the distinctive, mutually constitutive relationships that pertain between *back then* and *now*, the medieval past and their own contemporary worlds. Reading Chaucer in this way can engage students in the borderlands work of cultural encounter and transformation. This, I think, is the heart of the work we do as teachers of the medieval past.

As a case study of that work, I seek here to articulate the value my students and I have found reading Chaucer together in the US-Mexico Borderlands. As both a medievalist and an administrator, I feel the urgency of this task. I have been fortunate to teach in a program that requires a senior-level course in either Chaucer or Milton for many (previously, all) English majors. But that requirement is unlikely to survive. As Department Head, I am currently spearheading a curricular revision driven by a set of factors that will be familiar to many of us: austerity, exacerbated by COVID-19; upper-administration investment in “social mobility” (read: job skills) and “teaching capacity” (read: generation of student credit hours); and our own desire as faculty to diversify and decolonize our curricula. I am not interested in defending our existing Chaucer/Milton requirement *per se*. I believe we need a leaner, more flexible curriculum: one that engages students through overlap with general education (cf. Kline 2020), allows each of us to teach to our strengths, and puts creative pressure on both the literary canon and the discipline(s) of English Studies. To find the best place for Chaucer and

¹ I am grateful to the audience of the “Chaucer in the Classroom” roundtable at NCS 2016 (London), and to the literature research group at New Mexico State University, for invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this piece.

² I am grateful to Jean-Thomas Tremblay for suggesting this formulation; personal communication, 2/12/2021.

medieval studies in such a reconceived curriculum, and to argue successfully for their inclusion both with my colleagues in English and with upper administration, I need to be able to explain clearly what Chaucer has done, so to speak, for my Borderlands students—and perhaps also what *they* have done for *him*. This, then, is in part an invitation to take the classroom seriously as a space that can, and should, reshape our fields.

A senior-level requirement like ours brings into sharp focus Chaucer’s foundational status in the English literary canon, just at the moment when students are finishing their English degrees and preparing to cross over from academia into the “real world.” Our Chaucer requirement thus offers opportunities to think about the pedagogical and social work the canon does, both within and beyond academic institutions. In the early aughts, I taught a version of the Chaucer course subtitled, “Who Died and Made Chaucer the Father of English Poetry?”; the half-facetious answer was Richard II—an approach that invites us to think about the mutual imbrication of literary canon and state power. Teaching Chaucer on the Border over the years, my focus has shifted. I have come to understand Chaucer as both an ultra-canonical poet and something of an outsider to the canon, writing before its establishment and within a medieval world since constructed as the defining Other of modernity. I have become convinced that Chaucer is better read from the margins—in my case, the US-Mexico Borderlands—than from the heart of the academic metropole. Such readings can suggest ways that Chaucer might disrupt or transform the canon of which he was retrospectively made founder.

The most useful skills my students bring to Chaucer are those they have developed as *frontizeros*, natives of the US-Mexico Borderlands. NMSU students come from a wide range of cultural and academic backgrounds, though most are local and working-class and many are first-generation college students. Astute readers of cultural stereotypes and social power dynamics, immersed in language politics and adept at navigating ideological difference as a matter of survival, my *frontizero* students are already skilled border-crossers, accustomed to holding a delicate balance between connection and alterity. This serves them uncannily well as readers of Chaucer. It has also shown me how apt border theory and border pedagogy are to Chaucerian poetics.

More on the theory below; to begin to see how this works in practice I would like to develop the analogy with which I began, between Chaucer’s linguistic situation and ours here on the Border. In Chaucer’s London, language differences map roughly onto the traditional estates: Latin for clerical institutions, including the universities; French for aristocratic ones (government, law, courtly poetry); and English, itself a hybrid and rapidly-changing language, as a third-estate vernacular gaining traction in loftier places. This is not to mention the languages Chaucer would have encountered in mercantile London and in his European travels. In our twenty-first-century Borderlands, language use is also shaped by function, though here linguistic boundaries more explicitly reinforce racialized power structures. On our Border, English is clearly the prestige language, the power of its Anglo speakers reinforced by the Border Patrol stations that block every highway out of town. I am never stopped, though I moved here just twenty years ago to take a job; a friend I’ll call Isais, whose family has lived in the region for six hundred years, is stopped every time. But things get complicated very quickly. To begin with, most local Hispanics who identify as Mexican, like Isais, have been here for generations—since the area was, in fact, part of Mexico, the border having moved with the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848. Meanwhile, many Hispanic Northern New Mexicans identify as Spanish rather than Mexican or *Chicanx*, tracing their heritage back to the *conquistadores*. Adding to the complexity is the

fact that local dialects of Spanish are looked down on by global Spanish speakers, including our neighbors to the south in Ciudad Juárez, MX; one is reminded of Ardis Butterfield's discussion (2009) of the relations between insular and continental French. Finally, many of my students speak Spanglish, a low-status hybrid with its own codes and rituals of initiation. We sometimes joke that Chaucer's decision to write the *Troilus* in English is not unlike a Border poet choosing to write Homeric epic, or an Elizabethan sonnet sequence, in Spanglish. The parallel is inexact but useful.

My *frontizero* students engage avidly both with late-medieval language politics and with English as a hybrid language, a linguistic borderland whose topography is shaped variously by military conquest, trade, spiritual ambition, and literary invention. They have remarkable patience for tracing the etymologies of Chaucerian keywords and unpacking his usage of vocabulary from different linguistic traditions. Many feel their first real connection to his poetry when we read "To Rosamonde": "Was never pyk walwed in galauntyne / As I in love am walwed and ywounde" (l. 17).³ The image of an English fish wallowing helplessly in a French sauce, as the English poetic persona thrashes around in a French verse form, always makes my students laugh: for them, it echoes many primary-Spanish speakers' experiences in English (and vice versa), and also strikes them as an apt metaphor for their own imperfect immersion in Chaucer's poetry.

In fact, it is the monolingual English speakers in my classes who struggle most with Chaucer's language, while students who feel "not good enough" in both English and Spanish often have the easiest time. Reading Chaucer together, with a close attention to his individual words, thus exposes and disrupts the linguistic hierarchies my students inhabit on a daily basis.

The same is true of classroom power dynamics driven by academic preparation. Those students—predominantly Anglo—who are used to having an advantage in canonical literature courses find themselves suddenly at sea; high marks in AP lit (an advanced course in literature at an American high school) won't help you much with Chaucer, at least at first. Meanwhile, their Hispanic peers, especially those who grew up speaking some form of Spanish or Spanglish, often engage more easily both with Middle English and with Chaucer's pre-Reformation Christianity. (I use Anglo and Hispanic here as the preferred local terms.) Students accustomed to feeling out of their depth in required English classes find they can draw on their own cultural knowledge to speak with authority about this oldest of old dead white poets. Time and again, *frontizero* competencies trump academic ones, inviting us to rethink our assumptions about literary canon and academic authority.

Reading Chaucer on the Border, my students learn to engage with the past as a borderland: a place where cultures and identities meet and reshape each other. I can only highlight here a few key principles of borderlands theory, as developed most influentially by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987). Borderlands are spaces of intense cultural encounter that put pressure on identity as a category. In these politically fraught spaces, the "dream of a common culture" gives way before the daily exigencies of border crossings, both physical and ideological (McKenna 2003, 431). Geopolitical borders exist to enforce differentiation and hierarchy; borderlands are places of hybridity and, potentially, transformation—though as Anzaldúa notes, these are painful and difficult processes. Anzaldúa famously described the US-Mexico Border as "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds

³ All Chaucer citations are from Chaucer 1987.

merging to form a third country—a border culture” (25). A border isn’t just something you cross; it is something that shapes who you are, creating the conditions of possibility for a “new *mestiza* consciousness” (77). For the *frontizero*, as C. S. García (2018) puts it, “borderlands are an identity” (66).

It is important to many scholars not to abstract borderlands theory from its situated-ness on the US-Mexico Border. Historical and social particularity matter here. At the same time, as Anzaldúa herself suggests, the Border *frontizero* is often uniquely equipped to facilitate other, wider-ranging cultural transformations. “Homosexuals,” she famously writes, are the “supreme crossers of cultures.... Our role is to link people with each other... to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another;” queer people of color in particular “are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together” (Anzaldúa 1987, 106–7). Anzaldúa thus sees a reach for borderlands work beyond our local Border, especially as we bring more aspects of our identities into the endeavor. My Chaucer students have invited me (so to speak) to bring historical borderlands and border-crossings into this work. As a white medievalist who is not native to this geographical region, I acknowledge myself as an interloper here. At the same time, working with borderlands theory seems to demand a constant, tricky negotiation between the physical and the metaphorical, and between geopolitical realities, cultural encounters, and “inner” creative struggle (Anzaldúa 1987, 109; see also Montoya 2020). As a scholar of late-medieval English poetry, I find it hard not to think of Langlandian allegory here, the way that *Piers Plowman* shifts registers and confuses categories like social and spiritual, concrete and abstract.

A similar kind of toggling between the concrete and the abstract, the geographical and the conceptual, has become familiar in border pedagogy. Border pedagogy grew out of *Chicanx* activism in the Borderlands and seeks to transform students’ relationship to culture (see, e.g., McKenna 2003). In the foundational work of Henry Giroux, “border crossing” is the work of radical pedagogy, in which students and teachers push each other across boundaries and out of their respective comfort zones, highlighting “how individual agents negotiate among different forces” (Elenes 2006, 216). Border pedagogy, in other words, teaches students to see beyond boundaries, to engage the transformative potential of borderlands, to try “fashioning new identities within existing configurations of power” (Giroux 1992, 51–2). But it is not enough to work creatively within extant hegemonies. Border pedagogy further seeks to transform those “existing configurations”: as students “come to understand otherness on its own terms,” they learn “how knowledge can be remapped, deterritorialized, and recentered” and thereby how “to rewrite the borders and coordinates of oppositional cultural politics” (Giroux 1992, 83; see also Bailey 2014). The medieval studies classroom and Chaucer courses in particular provide ample opportunities for this kind of transformative cultural encounter, for engaging with an other who is also uncannily related to the self. Indeed, we might read the *Canterbury Tales* as an exercise in border pedagogy *avant la lettre*: a staged confrontation of multiple voices and worlds that actively resists closure and facilitates multiple re-mappings of knowledge and power.

Chaucer himself is fascinated by boundaries and borderlands of all kinds. As my students and I work through a small group of short poems, the *House of Fame*, and a hefty selection of *Tales*, we encounter Chaucer as a poet of in-between spaces and difficult crossings. To take just two examples: in reading the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue* and *Tale* (with a heavy debt to Carolyn Dinshaw’s important work [1989]), we find him invoking a series of layered binaries—female/male, experience/authority,

lay/cleric, body/book, text/meaning, letter/spirit—and then blurring their boundaries into complex borderlands. If the female/body is the book to the male spirit/sense, my students wonder, what exactly is the Wife destroying when she tears and then burns Jankyn’s book—a female body? clerical authority?— and how does *this* gesture guarantee a happy patriarchal marriage? The *Man of Law’s Tale*, we notice, had pursued other crossings, casting the body of Custance in its rudderless boat as the object of overlapping desires to penetrate, to possess, to exchange, and to cross over. A student aptly invoked Custance’s “passive agency,” an oxymoron that seeks to capture both the agency of her submission to father and God, and the agential effects of her body and life that exceed her own intentions. The desire to possess Custance’s body sexually (whether in marriage, as a lover, or through rape) and the impulse to convert to Christianity (whether negotiated for a people or as an individual) are woven together in the *Tale*, entangled with violence and unravelling in the direction of empire. As we pursue these kinds of readings, the *Tales* themselves become an extended borderland where different voices and worlds collide, saturated with power and offering glimpses of transformation. Resolution and closure are repeatedly withheld. Students find themselves navigating cultural difference on several fronts: between past and present, but also between different social, cultural, and intellectual worlds of the past. This process repeatedly disrupts any simple binaries between *back then* and *now*, making my students collaborators in mapping/shaping historical borderlands.

Reading Chaucer in this way invites my students to become more intentional and creative citizens of all their overlapping B/borderlands. This, finally, is the larger goal that increasingly grounds my pedagogy. For in learning with my students to read Chaucer as a borderlands poet, I have also found in Chaucer a teacher of border pedagogy.

Like me, Chaucer inhabited a world where traditional boundaries around teaching and learning were challenged, and often breached. By the late fourteenth century, Middle English textuality had emerged as a site of extra-mural religious pedagogy, a place where laypeople could learn—and even teach—outside the walls of clerical institutions like the university and the parish. Like other Ricardian poets, Chaucer both participates in and thinks critically about the dynamics of extra-mural pedagogy, especially as it operates within a sacramental economy of salvation. Chaucer explores these issues most fully in the figure of the Pardoner, who has for me become a figure, however troubling, for my own Borderlands teaching/border pedagogy.

The Pardoner and I inhabit imperfectly analogous pedagogical borderlands. We both claim authority to shepherd others across boundaries drawn by knowledge and power: sacramental and eschatological boundaries for the Pardoner; academic and social/economic boundaries for me. We typically address our pedagogical efforts to those outside the metropole (rural English parishioners and their minimally-educated parsons; first-generation, *frontizero*, and other students on the academic margins), and we report back on those efforts to metropolitan subjects (on the Canterbury pilgrimage; in this journal). And for both of us, our queer bodies, imperfectly legible, matter in ways that we cannot always predict or control, multiplying and complicating the borderlands we inhabit as teachers.

I’ll begin to unpack this analogy in turn with another anecdote from my first year teaching Chaucer on the Border, back in the Spring of 2002. Here, the topic was the Pardoner’s portrait in the *General Prologue*. As a recent Bay Area transplant struggling to adjust to a culture that sometimes felt quietly hostile to queer folks, I am trying to figure out if I have come out to my students, if referring to “my partner” would do that work here. Meanwhile I am trying to get them to talk about the

Pardoner's gendered body. Long uncomfortable silences. Finally, a student demands, "Are you trying to tell me the Pardoner is *queer*?!" Yes!, I answer in relief, and move on. It was only on the drive home that it hit me: that student did not mean "queer" in a good way. I flash on the Pardoner himself struck dumb by Harry Bailey's violent (homophobic?) outburst. I have to pull over and catch my breath. I spend the next class period doing a quick-and-dirty introduction to academic queer theory. I also ask my students to remember that I may not be the only gay person in the room.

This incident put me in the uncomfortable position of identifying with the Pardoner, not only as a queer person, but also as a teacher. I have since come to embrace that identification and the discomfort that it brings. Identifying with the Pardoner has made me a more self-aware and critical practitioner of border/lands pedagogy, especially as a white woman who grew up not as a local *frontizero*, but as a faculty-brat native of academic culture. Like a pardoner entering a rural English village—or like a Ricardian poet playing with sermon form—I often feel that I inhabit a borderland between academic (or clerical) and *frontizero* (or lay) cultures. I also see loose but productive analogies between the borderlands work of salvation theology and of border pedagogy. As our contemporary Borderlands are for migrants and *frontizeros*, the late-medieval *saeculum* is at once a place to craft a life, often under the pressure of conflicting world views, and at the same time a difficult passage between countries, a place to get through on the way to somewhere new. The Fall erected a boundary between human beings and God's presence; the incarnation and crucifixion opened up the potential for crossing, making the *saeculum* into a borderland. The goal of salvation, not unlike the goals of border pedagogy or of Anzaldúa's "new *mestiza* consciousness," is not so much transcendence as *transformation*. And the in-between-ness of these analogous borderlands is imagined in temporal as well as spatial terms, as at once physical and metaphysical.

I want to be clear that I am *not* proposing a logical analogy in which Mexico is to the US as the fallen world is to paradise. And I recognize, too, that *crossing* operates in distinctive ways in eschatological borderlands, delimited by the temporal boundaries of human life and of the *saeculum* itself. But I do see generative parallels between the Pardoner's borderlands work and mine, loose analogies that can open up pedagogical conversations between past and present.

Chaucer locates his Pardoner at the intersection of overlapping borderlands, most notably those of gender and sacrament. A pardoner's job is to traffic between human and divine, the sincere penitent and their merciful God. A pardoner's body, legibly gendered and properly ordained, brokers this sacramental transaction. But Chaucer's Pardoner is hard to read in precisely those ways that authorize the position he claims: his gendered body, and his ordination status. My students and I bat around the usual debates about the Pardoner's gender identity and sexual orientation, and what his body might have to do with the (fake) relics he carries. But year after year, what exercises my *frontizero* students the most is the question of whether a sincere victim of the Pardoner's con would have their sins absolved or retain them unknowingly, perhaps to their damnation (an interest that may reflect strong local Catholic and Evangelical cultures). My students are furious to learn that the fate of the penitent depends neither on their own good intentions nor on the Pardoner's bad ones, but rather on his ordination status: according to orthodox doctrine, only an ordained priest, and *any* ordained priest, can absolve sins. Worse: Chaucer does not allow us to know Pardoner's ordination status, any more than he reveals the shape of the bodily organs that would establish the latter's place in a binary system of gender.

My students and I refer to these as the Pardoner's two great unknowns: his ordination status and the shape of his genitalia. Together, they leave the Pardoner's penitents, the Canterbury pilgrims, and modern readers—perhaps even, one could argue, the Pardoner himself—stranded together in overlapping borderlands, unsure if anyone or anything makes it across.

The Pardoner's two unknowns put enormous pressure on the system I think of as transactional theology: in the salvation theology of late-medieval England, objects, bodies, and texts enter into special systems of signification and exchange that enable them to *trans-act* between human and divine, acting across the borderlands between death and life. Transactional theology relies upon the mutual imbrication of matter and spirit, and on the ability of human beings to collaborate with the divine. As such, it is vulnerable to abuse and subject to fatal mis-readings. The Pardoner, along with his (fake) relics and his (real?) bulls, embodies the vulnerability of sacramental economies; his *Tale*, in turn, unfolds a series of mis-readings that threaten to reverse the foundational transaction of the crucifixion.

If border pedagogy takes place in the “liminal space between knowing and not knowing” where “knowledge collides with the in-between” (García 2018, 72), perhaps the Pardoner's body and his text can be such a space, suggesting new perspectives on teaching as borderlands work. As a corrupt broker of salvation, using his body to traffic between realms for material gain, the Pardoner evokes the Borderlands figure of the *coyote*: a black-market guide hired by migrants to lead them safely across the Border. Migrants desperately need their *coyote* but cannot know if they should trust him: there are stories of *coyotes* abandoning their clients in the desert or to the Border Patrol, or worse. His true character is illegible to them, but they are entirely at his disposal. While research has shown that most *coyotes* work in small organizations or as solo ops, and that most have strong ties in both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving communities, governments on both sides of the Border have exacerbated fear and distrust of *coyotes* and *coyotaje*, in part by linking them with drug cartels (Spencer 2009, 201–215). The term itself, which describes any kind of extra-legal brokerage in Mexican Spanish (Spencer 2009, 90–94), also associates the *coyote* with the figure of Coyote as he appears variously in Meso-American, Southwestern Indian, and First Nations storytelling, where Coyote is typically a trickster-figure, breeding creation out of chaos and blurring the lines between wisdom and folly (Bailey 2014, 6-8). A number of scholars have used Coyote as a figure for epistemological, disciplinary, and/or pedagogical crossings (e.g., Bailey 2014; Graham-Jones 2016; Poey 1996). Chaucer's Pardoner, I want to suggest, practices a kind of *coyote* pedagogy—both by virtue of his (claimed) profession, and in the particularities of his own embodied performances.

I adapt the term “coyote pedagogy” from Fee and Flick (1999), who coin it to describe the juxtaposition of different cultural knowledges in the work of Canadian First Nations novelist Thomas King. In King's novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, Fee and Flick argue, “borders are crossed by what you know and don't know. Coyote pedagogy requires training in illegal border-crossing” (131). Coyote himself appears as a character in the novel and is central to King's efforts to “subsume European culture and history in an Aboriginal framework” (136). Different bodies of knowledge encounter and penetrate and transform each other, leading to the disestablishment of Western epistemological regimes. Something similar can happen, I think, in the Chaucer classroom, where a reading of *The Canterbury Tales* can feel like a crash course in different medieval bodies of knowledge voiced in conversation and competition with each other. Interestingly, Chaucer's propensity to think theologically through the body and its least cerebral functions finds a parallel here as well: Fee and

Flick note that “the move from eschatology to scatology is part of Native subversive humor” (134). Chaucer tends to move in the other direction: the theologically-minded fart jokes of the Miller’s and Summoner’s *Tales* index a Chaucerian borderland between bodily functions and spiritual knowledge, a layman’s fart and divine breath, that my post-Cartesian Western students often resist traversing.

Medieval sacramental economies are predicated on the idea that the human body, as redeemed by Christ’s incarnation and crucifixion, can broker salvation. The fart jokes of the Miller’s and Summoner’s *Tales* push that idea nearly to the breaking-point. Harry Bailly’s outburst at the end of the *Pardoner’s Tale*, in turn, accuses the Pardoner of desecrating sacramental borderlands, passing off his own shit as relics and thereby reducing the eschatological to the merely scatological. The framing of this passage with invitations to kiss—the Pardoner’s to Harry to kiss his relics, and the Knight’s to the Pardoner and Harry to exchange a kiss of peace—combined with Harry’s insistently anal language raises the specter of sexual acts between men; queer embodiment seems to be associated with the reversal or collapse of sacramental transactions. Throughout the *Pardoner’s Prologue* and *Tale*, dis- and mis-embodiments such as these threaten to reverse the salvific effects of the crucifixion: think of the rioters’ tearing of Christ’s body with oaths or of their infamous misreading of Death. While Harry’s outburst would seem to associate perverse mis-embodiments with queer sexuality, the text as a whole also associates them with extramural pedagogy. In this *Tale*, the traditional boundaries of clerical institutions (like, perhaps, the gendered bodies of some clerics) have been breached; pedagogical encounters, such as the Old Man’s with the rioters or, for that matter, the Pardoner’s with the Canterbury pilgrims often take place outside the walls, in rapidly-expanding pedagogical borderlands. In the Pardoner and his text, queer embodiment and extramural pedagogy are inextricably linked in a way that exposes vulnerabilities in the whole late-medieval system of transactional theology.

Queerness also plays a central role in border theory and pedagogy. For Anzaldúa, as we have seen, queerness is a special kind of borderland, one that reaches and touches across multiple kinds of boundaries. More recently, Gilbert Valadez and Anne René Elsbree (2005), colleagues at the Center for Border Pedagogy, Cal State San Marcos, describe themselves as “queer coyotes,” “aiding those crossing the homophobic borders within the borderlands region” of San Diego County (172, 175). Valadez and Elsbree identify four qualities of the *coyote* that apply to their work as queer Borderlands professors: maintaining *secreto*, knowing *los códigos*, using *la facultad*, and sharing *un compromiso* (172). While acknowledging that the *coyote* is “perceived as valuable, dangerous, and undesirable all at once” (175), Valadez and Elsbree present an unambiguously positive view of the (pedagogical) queer coyote, who, while not always successful in bringing students safely across, remains clear in purpose and motive. I find that vision appealing, but Chaucer’s Pardoner, I think, invites us to be equally attuned to the vulnerabilities inherent in queer border pedagogies—to be open, we might say, to more recent queer theoretical investments in the anti-social and in failure (cf. Goodrich 2020).

Chaucer’s Pardoner as pedagogue mimics and perverts Valadez and Elsbree’s model of the Borderlands teacher as queer coyote. I am aware that this is itself a temporally perverse reading; I hope it suggests the ways that imperfect analogy can open new borderlands between past and present. The Pardoner is a gender outlaw and spiritual *bandido*, preying on those who rely on clerical *facultad* to navigate the treacherous crossing between this world and the next. He knows the *codigos* that govern late-medieval transactional theology and takes pride in using them to exploit the spiritual needs of others for his own material gain. He unmask his con only to invite the pilgrims, and Harry in

particular, to entrust him with their own *secreto* through confession—as if his own self-revelations had not already undone the *compromiso* that underwrites penance and pardon. And perhaps it has not. Because we cannot read Pardoner’s ordination status, we simply do not know if the pilgrims would have been absolved of any sins they confessed sincerely to the Pardoner—any more than we know whether Harry could physically carry out his threat to cut off the Pardoner’s “coillons” and “enshrine” them “in an hogges turde” (VI.952, 955). Just as the Pardoner stands mute before Harry’s outburst, the *Tale* leaves us stranded in the borderlands between knowing and not-knowing, that is, in the very space of border pedagogy.

As I have tried to suggest here, I think the Pardoner’s body and his performance speak to many of the dynamics of twenty-first-century border pedagogy. In identifying with the Pardoner, I am reminded that my queer body inevitably participates in my teaching, often in ways I cannot predict or control. And while we occupy different pedagogical borderlands, the Pardoner also reminds me how easy it is to get lost in my own performances. I don’t think it’s right to give up on guiding others through borderlands of knowledge-power. But I do think it’s more important to learn with and from my students how to occupy such hybrid, wandering spaces ethically, together. Chaucer has been my teacher in this border pedagogy. He has an uncanny feel for the ways that power and vulnerability can coexist within the same body. Chaucerian poetics as a literary borderland is always threatening to deconstruct itself, its generative conflicts dissolving into anger and silence. And yet Chaucer always picks it up and tries another way, bringing more voices on board. Border pedagogy, like transactional theology, comes with real risks; the best we can do, I think, is (like Chaucer) to represent and engage them.

When I think, then, about Chaucer’s place in a twenty-first-century curriculum—leaner, less canon- and period-driven, more effectively anti-racist and decolonizing—I think about what my *frontizero* students and I have learned from Chaucer about inhabiting borderlands. I imagine ways to draw on the imperfect analogies I have traced here to invite my students into the mutual shaping of past and present, as a distinctive kind of transformative cultural encounter. And I think, too, about ways teaching Chaucer as borderlands poet might disrupt, rather than simply reify or initiate, models of canon or discipline. Delia Marie Poey (1996) describes as “border-crossers and coyotes” those critics and teachers who bring Latin American literary works into the English studies canon/classroom. Noting that some texts and authors are more easily “smuggled” across “linguistic, class, and disciplinary borders” without posing a threat to existing structures of power, she argues that the harder, crucial work requires a “commitment ... to clearing and creating transformational spaces where these texts can refuse to blend in and instead engage with and revise their canonical and mainstream surroundings” (154). It has been my contention here that Chaucer, not only despite but also because of his ultra-canonical status, might also be used to clear such transformational spaces. How can our work as teachers and as shapers of curriculum, perhaps even more than our work as scholars, contribute to this project?

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