

ENGL 5701: Chaucer's Short Stories and Long Epic

Spencer K. Wall, Fall 2023, TuTh 9:10-10:30
(fulfills pre-1800 requirement for English Majors)



Today Geoffrey Chaucer's best known works are his *Canterbury Tales*, a collection of diverse, often vulgar short stories, told by a collection of medieval English pilgrims from every social walk of life. Chaucer's other most influential work is *Troilus and Criseyde*, a long romance epic about two ill-fated lovers of ancient Trojan nobility.

In this course, we will devote one half of our time to Chaucer's tales, the other to his epic. In so doing, we will get a full, rich sense of medieval England's most influential storyteller and poet. We'll also use this reading experience to think through Chaucer's texts about the narrative devices and demands of short- and long-form fictions, about how short and longer stories contrast and compare. To what extent are the fragmented, individual Canterbury tales part of a larger frame narrative about the pilgrims, and to what extent can we find form and closure in this uncompleted, open-ended narrative frame? And on the other hand, to what extent is the whole and complete epic of *Troilus and Criseyde* fragmented and broken—broken into idiosyncratic episodes—and broken into short, seven-line stanzas, a poetic verse form of storytelling seemingly originated by Chaucer.

We will take the readings of this course at the slow and leisurely pace of holiday pilgrims, especially at the beginning of the semester, in order to spend ample time together learning how to read Chaucer's magnificent Middle English. No prior experience with Chaucer or Middle English is required or expected.