

Whoa! The Miller's wife's a hottie

ALEXANDRA GILL raps with Baba Brinkman, who has hauled Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* into the 21st century

If Eminem can top the charts with a new album on which he burps, breaks wind and bashes Michael Jackson, what's so strange about a young white kid from Vancouver who is creating a buzz with raps about rowdy bar rats, upper-class rapists and a flatulent adulterer who gets his due?

In the hip-hop world, it might not seem strange at all. But in the case of Baba Brinkman, the stories he tells are literary classics adapted from Middle English, his fans include Cambridge academics and his inspiration is none other than Geoffrey Chaucer.

Whoa, drop the beat. "As far as I'm concerned, Chaucer was the rapper of medieval England," says Brinkman. "I'm trying to prove that rap is poetry—it's all part of the same continuum."

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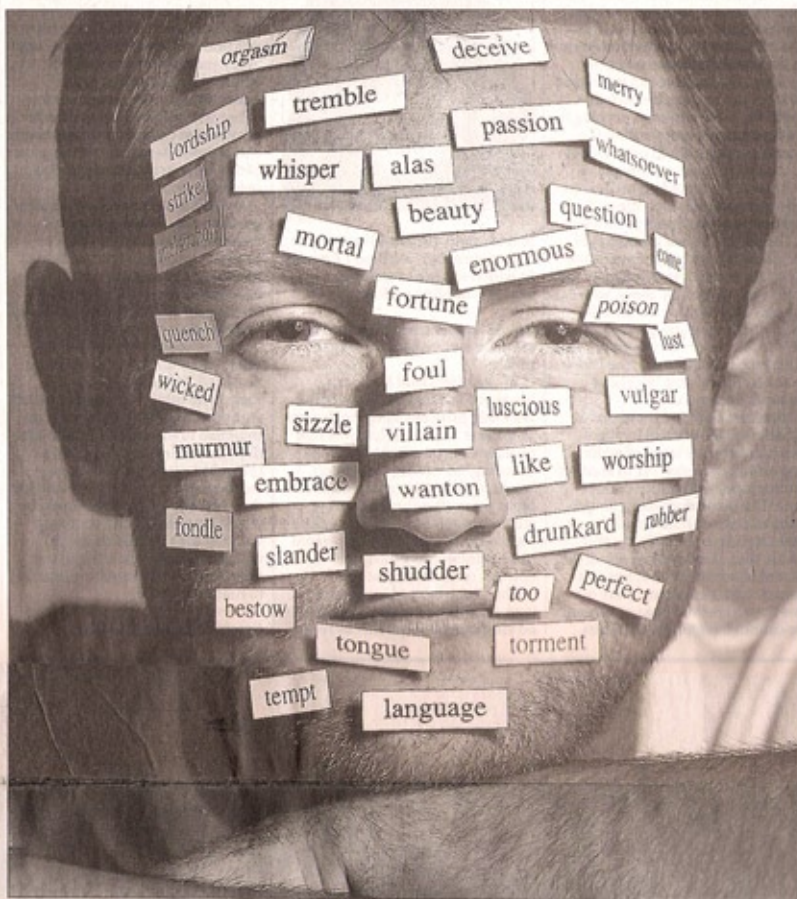
The 26-year-old dead man's rapper says he doesn't aspire to have his poetry published. He does, however, have a new independent CD, *The Rap Canterbury Tales*, which is being launched tonight at the Western Front in Vancouver, where he will also perform the one-man show that earned him an extremely rare five-star review from *The Scotsman* during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival last summer.

"Suddenly it's clear," wrote the *critic* *Zolt* *Arden*. "Chaucer's language is perfect for rap, what with the alliteration and, of course, the Middle English propensity for rhyming, both at the end of lines and within them, a habit inherited from the oral tradition of storytelling and used as a memory aid."

Brinkman has been saying the same thing for nearly five years, which is when he first began working on his honours thesis at Simon Fraser University, *Competitive Poetics: Chaucer versus Hip-Hop*.

"I was trying to connect rap in some way to English literary history," says Brinkman, a friendly fellow with reddish-blond hair, freckles and eyes that crinkle to a squint when he smiles.

"I thought I'd maybe use Shakespeare, because of the popular performance aspect. And I read a lot of [John] Skelton, because his rhyme



JOHN LEHMANN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Brinkman's *Canterbury Tales* is about a hip-hop fan who stows away on a tour bus after a concert.

format is a lot like DMX's style. But I ended up going for Chaucer because of how fully conceived *The Canterbury Tales* is.

"The way he lays it out with the pilgrims, it's identical to the way freestyle battles work.

"With rap, there's this whole pass-the-mike concept. The audience is expected to participate and shout it down if the rap's no good."

Brinkman's version of *The Canterbury Tales* (both the show and the CD) tells the story of a young

star-struck fan who stows away on a tour bus after a hip-hop concert. Once the bus starts rolling, the tour manager encourages his posse of celebrity rappers (the somewhat unlikely named but nevertheless familiar Pardoner, Miller and Wife of Bath) to kill the time with a storytelling battle.

Because his intent is to make Chaucer accessible to younger audiences, Brinkman takes plenty of liberties with language.

In his translation, the Miller is a

"lowlife" who drinks "40-ouncers." His wife is a "hottie" with the "body of a mink."

But unlike, say, the recent and widely criticized BBC miniseries, which took snippets of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and reworked them into modern stories about karaoke bars and prison brawls, Brinkman tries to stay as true as possible to the originals, in terms of style and content.

And when performing live, he does it all with one pair of sunglasses,

two chairs and a prerecorded soundtrack of simple beats, old-crone cackles and various other background asides.

The show has been particularly popular with high-school students. Brinkman began doing classroom workshops when studying for his master's degree in medieval and Renaissance English literature at the University of Victoria, from which he graduated last year.

In the wake of last summer's Fringe tour, he's been performing regularly for university and high-school students in British Columbia's Lower Mainland. And beginning in January, Cambridge University is sponsoring a three-week tour of schools in Britain, which will be followed by a one-week run at London's Etcetera Theatre in February.

'I really hope it finds a larger audience in schools,' says Brinkman, the eldest son of New Westminster MLA Joyce Murray.

'Sure, it's fun for anyone to listen to—the stories are weird and punchy—but there's a real educational value. These are hip-hop lyrics with intelligent content. And by talking to kids, I'm showing them that what Chaucer was saying is relevant to them today.'

'Although Brinkman still considers himself a rapper first and poet second, he says his *Rap Canterbury Tales* has been received more enthusiastically by academics than the hip-hop world.'

'It's not like I was an established rapper when I began doing this. Most rappers are lukewarm about it. Some are supportive and say, 'Cool, you're doing something new and taking it into different realms.' Others are dismissive. But so far, no one's been hostile. What's important for me is that audiences are loving it and people are having fun.'

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Baba Brinkman performs *The Rap Canterbury Tales* tonight at 8 p.m., at Vancouver's Western Front (303 East 8th Ave.). For more information: www.babasword.com.