

Wassup, Geoffrey? Rapper retells Chaucer for children

By Richard Garner

Education Editor

A rap artist is bringing Geoffrey Chaucer to life for today's schoolchildren in the latest attempt to make the classics accessible to modern generations.

The Canadian hip-hop star Baba Brinkman has just completed a two-month tour of British schools with a rap act based on the writings of the 14th-century author. Baba was recruited to the classroom by a researcher from Cambridge University's Faculty of English after he attracted rave reviews for his Chaucer show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

"It was absolutely wonderful," Sarah James, a research associate, said. "It was a lot of fun and that's exactly what the original *Canterbury Tales* are all about."

She managed to persuade Baba to return to Britain. The rapper, who studied Chaucer (1342-1400) in the US, completed his tour this month with a performance at St Matthew's primary school in Cambridge.

"They're using me as kind of a hook," Baba said. "I go into schools and do the Chaucer rap and that's the kids' introduction to medieval theatre." The *Rap Canterbury Tales* started in 1999 as an experiment, he added. "Comparing Chaucer's poetry to those of rap artists was the subject of my thesis at the time



The Pardoner was a cleric who collected money in exchange for letters of indulgence

and this seemed a natural extension. Since then the project has snowballed into a successful one-man theatrical performance, a series of educational presentations and workshops and a CD recording."

The Canterbury Tales was re-

cently brought into modern times for a BBC series starring actors such as Billie Piper. The introduction of the *Rap Canterbury Tales* follows several attempts to bring another great English writer, William Shakespeare, to life for children. The Shakespeare

Schools Festival, launched five years ago, consists of performing half-hour reduced versions of the Bard's plays to make them more digestible for young children. Only last month, *The Independent* also reported how the Royal Shakespeare Company

was holding a workshop for primary school teachers aimed at looking at ways of introducing four-year-olds to the playwright.

Ideas included taking some of Shakespeare's "fun" characters - such as Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - and introducing

children to them. "If you build Puck up as a character who skips, children of that age can enjoy the character," Mary Johnson, head of the learning department at the RSC, said. "They can be inspired by Puck and they could even start writing about him at that age."

The Pardoner's Tale

CHAUCER WROTE:

And up they stirte,
Al dronken in this rage,
And forth they goon towards that village,
Of which the taverner hadde spoke biform,
And many a grisly oath thane han they sworn,
And cristes blessed body al torente,
Death shal be deed,
If that they may hym hente!
When they han goon nat fully half a mile



BABA'S TRANSLATION READS:

When he said his piece,
The rest agreed
And the three friends hit the streets.
And went to seek their destiny and provoke a
confrontation,
In a drunken rage hoping Death would come and
face them,
Their intoxication made them sure of their purpose,
And fed the infernal furnace of their courage,
A kernel nourished by these three murderous wretches in denial,
Less than a mile into their quest to put Death on trial



Baba says: "The translations stay as close as possible to the tone and thrust of the original *Tales* - while completely updating the language. They are occasionally a bit raunchy but I relinquish all due credit and blame to Chaucer, as he did to his 'sources'."