

WORDFEST

Breaking down Chaucer

Baba Brinkman brings a hip-hop vibe to The Canterbury Tales

NICK LEWIS
CALGARY HERALD

Rapper Baba Brinkman says the first time he read Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, it made him think of a rap battle. And so for six years now, the 26-year-old Simon Fraser University graduate has been performing the classic poem with a hip-hop backbeat, as a way to enlighten people on the brilliance and universality of Chaucer.

PREVIEW

Baba Brinkman performs today and Saturday at WordFest. Both events are sold out.

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Maori poet Robert Sullivan

"I'm not trying to take it to the ghetto, I'm just trying to tell the story as it would be told today," the Vancouver native says.

Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* between 1387 and 1400. It is a collection of stories within one framework of a story,

telling the tale of 30 people from all walks of society on a pilgrimage to Canterbury (England). Its importance comes in showing how people and society haven't changed much in six centuries.

Brinkman breaks down Chaucer's classic middle English into Quentin Tarantino plots and gangsta rap references, so that they're easily digestible and understandable by students who would study the bard. His is essentially



Tim Fraser, Calgary Herald

Baba Brinkman performs Chaucer for Lord Beaverbrook students.

a hip-hop theatre show based in medieval literature.

"*The Canterbury Tales* is a 14th century manuscript, but it reads like 8 Mile if you understand it," Brinkman says. "Chaucer anticipated rap in so many ways, his whole structure of battling stories, the art of storytelling as a performance artform."

Performing at Lord Beaverbrook High School in front of Grade 10 and 12 students — a very tough crowd to say

the least — Brinkman raps through *The Miller's Tale*, *The Pardoner's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. He makes allusions to the Pardoner looking like Kid Rock and rapping like KRS-One, and the drunk and belligerent Miller sounding like the Ol' Dirty Bastard.

So far, he's performed *The Rap Canterbury Tales* in seven cities around the world, including Prague, Edinburgh and San Francisco.

Last year he completed an album version of the material, which is available on his site at babasword.com.

And this is just his day job — Brinkman says his real love is the freestyle rapping he does at night.

"Like every other rapper, I'm looking for a record deal, looking to get play on the radio," he says. "And in the meantime I can do this, which helps my skills and is pretty fun."

And Brinkman says this rap battling experience means he's not nervous trying to entertain and educate fidgety, cross-armed students.

"I know my chops, I'm pretty hip-hop savvy," he says. "The crowd in a freestyle rap is meant to be harsh, they're meant to be hostile. It's not the opera, no one is going to give you credit for effort. You win the crowd, you win the battle, so you use punchlines, whatever it takes. There's no rating system, it's just whatever they like."

"So you can't ever say, that crowd has no taste — you just lost."