

# Ripping the rapper

From a masters in medievalism to hardcore hip-hopper, Baba Brinkman raps Chaucer to **Beth McEvoy**

**T**he deliciously incongruous phrase "Chaucer Scholar and Rapper" had me in stitches for the whole three days in between seeing the poster and seeing the multi-talented man in question.

Rapping the works of a comrade of the canon is usually, and patronisingly, seen as "dumbing down". It's the kind of thing teachers might transport into Toxteth on the assumption that the kids there wouldn't relate to literature in any other way. So it was a surprise to see such a show among the learned spires of Cambridge.

Baba Brinkman, of apparent Vancouver 'fame', addressed in excess of fifty students in the English faculty on Friday. The crowd was hyperactively hungry, probably hoping to annihilate Brinkman with their cruelly pedantic intelligence.

"Hip-hop rhymes resonate with me" he began, explaining that rap is "the only modern poetry" that he identifies with. An enemy of free verse (or, more kindly, a lover of polysyllabic rhymes) he identifies Chaucer as being a poet easily comparable with hip-hop. "I'm not saying the New York rappers of the 1970s were directly influenced by Chaucer," he reassures us. "They may have name-checked Shakespeare or Edgar Allen Poe though". It is, in fact, the culture of the rap battle in which he sees most similarities. "In the Tale of Sir Topas, a lyrical battle essentially takes place. When a self-disguised Chaucer takes to the stage and drops his story, it's so weak and so poor, man, that the host jumps in and interrupts him. Chaucer's just been dissed!" Enthusiastically, he continues: "The host starts ripping him with all these insults. Chaucer can't make the cut with his rhymes, so he has to take a step back. It's like, has anyone seen 8 Mile?"

Brinkman does make some interesting points about hip-hop, however. "Freestyle battling is one of the only art forms you can't fake. There's no corruptibility, you can't bribe or buy off a whole audience. There is also no essential judge of what's good or not, as audiences will vary from night to night. The battle is a spontaneous art form. It's like suicide; for sure you're going to get insulted by the other guy, but you might just get insulted by the whole club." This merciless mockery has happened to Brinkman himself. Apparently, to "boo battlers offstage" the crowd chants "Choke,

choke, choke!" Maybe in Canada...

Cultural differences aside, however, he soon launched onto his first rendition. He has translated the tales from the original Old English and has kept as closely to the story as he can. With rhymes like "When really it's just a dungeon of self consumption / in other words it's not worth it / when flesh is the only thing you worship", he got the attention of the crowd. The Chaucer/celebrity comparisons continue, with the protagonist of the Pardoner's Tale being described as "looking like Kid Rock".

Brinkman himself has a brilliantly dramatic face and is clearly a talented actor. By the time he recites the hip-hop Miller's Tale he had won nearly everyone over. I say nearly everyone. When calling the audience "English geeks" somebody shouted out "you're fat". Which is a pretty poor insult for a so-called rap battle, but maybe the best a 'polite society' scallion can manage.

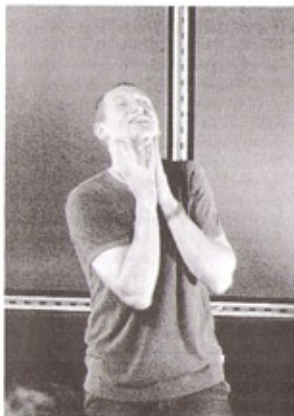
The opening of It's Miller Time, Y'all raised some laughter, but not nearly so much as "Married a young filly he couldn't satisfy! In the sack this guy was on disability". The lewd giggles showed themselves in force for the suggestive rhyme "Her lips were soft and dripping wet / as lips are prone to get when caressed... with breath".

By far the most entertaining performance also happened to be Chaucer's (and nearly all critics') favourite Canterbury Tale: The Wife of Bath. It's the one the feminist critics love and Brinkman delivered the original 'what women want' fable wonderfully. If you're wondering about the answer, guys, reputedly "what's really required to keep people sane / is for men to give women free reign." Try telling that to Jay-Z.

Brinkman is a very good rapper and a gifted actor, but an even better Chaucer scholar. His in depth knowledge of the tales is immense and, hip-hop aside, it's refreshing to see a medievalist without a tweed jacket. He got an A for his thesis, despite a professor writing on an essay: "Excellent work. Let's just forget about hip-hop and concentrate on Chaucer."

As well as educating us he wants to show kids that "you don't have to be a gangster to rap!" This is reflected somewhat in his choices of hip-hop listening, citing the predictable backpacker rap of Mos Def, Dilated Peoples and (the stunning) Atmosphere. He does, however, rate more mainstream rappers but finds the

**The many faces of the Chaucer scholar and rapper Ben Jones**



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dichotomy "between the politics and the art" difficult. "For example, someone like Eminem is a good writer. You hate what they're saying, but you have to love the way they're saying it." It is a 21st century version of Oscar Wilde's assertion that "the fact of a man being a poisoner is nothing against his prose".

But with the poetry of Chaucer to bastardise, and the hip-hop skills he bears, Brinkman is an easily likeable choice for audiences. Cambridge kids they may be,

but kids all the same; they were definitely "down with him". To paraphrase what Barry Norman once said of Luhrman's Romeo and Juliet, this may well be Chaucer "for the MTV generation". Nevertheless, 600 years later, this rendition of the Canterbury Tales is select, schooled, faithful and, above all, entertaining.

Having performed across continents and at the Edinburgh festival, Baba Brinkman will be performing his hip-hop theatre in Michaelhouse Cafe all of this week.