

Rapper has his own tale to tell

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Six years ago, Baba Brinkman wrote his own hip-hop "Coles notes" version of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

His university classmates were having a hard time understanding the writer's formal 14th-century

middle-English style and Brinkman wanted to help out.

"People are curious about Chaucer, but they don't want to do the legwork to learn middle-English," says Brinkman, a Vancouver native. "I wanted it to be a snapshot of Chaucer, so you can get the whole tale in 10 minutes. It might take an hour to read it."

At the time, the aspiring rap artist and student was comparing Chaucer's poetics to those of rap artists as the subject of his thesis.

"I went to my professors and said, 'From now on, my subject is rap, I'm going to research it and write about it.' There was a little bit of resistance at first," he laughs. "They just told me, 'Don't think you're going to get away with doing less work because

Brinkman's adaptation of *The Knight's Tale* has condensed Chaucer's 2,000 lines of middle-English verse to just 400 rap lines. It takes Brinkman 20 minutes to tell *The Knight's Tale* compared to a four hour reading of the Chaucer version. The other adapted tales, which are shorter, take Brinkman about 10 minutes to rap.

There are a number of similarities in theme, rhyme and rhythm between Chaucer's tales and rap, says Brinkman, who is using his project to make the point that rap is a form of poetry.

"I think Chaucer would have really appreciated rap ... He seems to have anticipated rap in a lot of ways," says Brinkman.

But, Brinkman isn't trying to stand in as a substitute for Chaucer.

"I don't want people to hear the rap instead of reading Chaucer. I want people to hear the rap and then be inspired to go read Chaucer."

Brinkman, who bares a resemblance to a younger Chaucer as well as rapper Eminem, says most of his income comes from performing the show at schools and festivals.

That money goes into the recording studio where he pursues his love of hip-hop music. Brinkman has collaborated with rap artists like Elemental from the UK. His writing can be compared to the likes of Kanye West and Buck 65, who try to make a statement with their music, rather than just trying to get played



Baba Brinkman in performance. PHOTO SUBMITTED

on the radio.

"A lot of rap changes theme every two lines. I take rap and use it to talk about important things, social problems — use it as a medium to communicate any kind of message and not have it be frivolous," says Brinkman.

Brinkman's *Rap Canterbury Tales* have received a lot of attention, with entire chat rooms and web blogs dedicated to its criticism. He wishes audiences would read his adapted tales before forming an opinion.

"People are quick to judge it ... But it seems like no one is actually reading it or listening to it. At the end of the day, don't judge it based on the idea, let it speak for itself."

The Edmonton LitFest, a free celebration of literature, runs from Oct. 13 to 16. For other LitFest events go to www.litfestalberta.org.

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out as an experiment has snowballed into a successful and highly popular one-man theatrical performance.

Brinkman has taken his *Rap Canterbury Tales* to 10 festivals around the world, has recorded an album, performs in schools, and has a book deal with Talon Books. The University of Alberta bookstore recently ordered 20 copies of his album. Brinkman will also perform during Edmonton's LitFest on Oct. 16, beginning at 2 p.m. in the Stanley A. Milner Library. There is no admission fee.

The *Canterbury Tales* include 24 stories by pilgrims who try to out-do each other with their storytelling skills during a pilgrimage to Canterbury. Brinkman has translated four of stories into rap — *The Knight's Tale*, *The Pardoner's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale* and *The Wife of Bath*.