

# Listen up, kids, it's MC Chaucer in da house wid his Tales

By Jack Malvern  
Arts Reporter

A RAP artist has taken the poems of Geoffrey Chaucer and transformed "Whilom there was a dwellyng at Oxenford/ A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to boorde" into: "Listen to this tune, it's about a rich man/ Licking a silver spoon, who lived in a mansion."

Baba Brinkman, a Canadian hip-hop artist, has turned *The Canterbury Tales* into rap to teach schoolchildren Chaucer.

The rapper, an English graduate who wrote his thesis on Chaucer, has performed his versions of four of the tales in front of 1,600 children over the past six weeks as part of an education programme run by Cambridge University.

But he has had to tone down Chaucer's language because the medieval poems are too saucy. "The modern translation of being 'caught by the queynte' doesn't exactly work with a younger audience," he said. "I say to the kids, 'You think I am adding [saucy scenes] in, but I'm not. I'm taking things out.'"

He had to be particularly careful with *The Miller's Tale*, which is one of Chaucer's most

explicit poems. "*The Miller's Tale* in particular contains a lot of references to genitalia and body humour. Some of it had to be censored to make it suitable for children."

He has also adapted *The Pardoner's Tale*, *The Tale of the Wyf of Bathe* and *The Knyght's Tale* for his tour, which covered 24 schools in Oxford and Cambridge. Brinkman, 26, first performed before a British audience at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe last year after he decided that Chaucer's 14th-century verse would be more accessible as rap. He reduced *The Knyght's Tale* from 2,000 lines to 400.

"It should help young people to see how vibrant his stories are and make them more interested," he said. "All the themes of rap music are in the tales: jealousy, anger, greed and lust."

He had never performed rap before because, he said, he was "an English [literature] nerd".

"I was always into rap, but I never did it myself because I wasn't from the ghettos. I'm white and my parents live in the suburbs. But rappers say that anyone can be a rapper as long as you are true to yourself. I was an English nerd, so I turned that into rap."

## THEN AND NOW

### Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*

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

### Baba's *Pardoner's Rap*

*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*

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A detail from a 1907 illustration by Walter Appleton Clark of *The Pardoner's Tale*, one of the stories Baba will turn into rap