

## OAKLAND

# Rappin' up classic 'Tales'

Pitt student brings Chaucer to modern audiences via lit-hop

By Kim Lyons  
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Baba Brinkman thinks "The Canterbury Tales" is an obvious choice to convert to a hip-hop beat, despite the fact it's a 13th-century unfinished work written in Middle English.

Brinkman, who will rap the stories at a free event today in Alumni Hall, said author Chaucer "was all about competition."

"The Canterbury Tales' is a storytelling battle, with metaphors and punchlines. It's like the freestyle rap battles I've been going to even before '8 Mile' came out," he said, referring to the 2002 Eminem movie.

"I actually came to Chaucer through hip-hop," Brinkman said. "I wanted to prove to my professors that oral traditions like Chaucer

## 'The Rap Canterbury Tales'

**What:** The University of Pittsburgh's Medieval and Renaissance studies program's live performance by Baba Brinkman

**When:** 4:30 p.m. today

**Where:** Alumni Hall, 4227 Fifth Ave., 7th floor auditorium

**How much:** Free

and Shakespeare were rap in its infancy."

Brinkman holds a master's degree in Medieval and Renaissance English Literature from the University of Victoria, in British Columbia, and has a healthy respect for the history of the "Tales."

The work in question tells the stories of a group of pilgrims on their way to the shrine of St. Thomas á Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The 26 stories are written in a variety of formats and largely are incomplete, but they often provide cutting social

## Brinkman and Chaucer battle

When the knight in the Wife of Bath's tale begs not to marry the less-than-comely Wife, Chaucer says:

*This knight answered: "Alas and welaway!*

*I wot right well that such was my behest.*

*For God's love, as choose a new request.*

*Take all my goods, and let my body go."*

Brinkman's translation goes:  
*He still tried to beg and borrow and plead*

*And he offered the deed to his father's property*

*And he sobbed and said, "Take whatever you want, please*

*Impoverish me. Just let my body go free."*



Brinkman

commentary about themes of religion and the weaknesses of human nature.

"The Canterbury Tales" is intended to be

performed aloud, since most of Chaucer's contemporary audiences would have been illiterate, said Hannah Johnson, an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

"I think so often we focus on them purely as texts, and we do get out of touch with the important elements of oral performance," Johnson said.

She's encouraging students in her Medieval Imagination class to attend today's performance. "I think it has the potential to be really interesting," Johnson said. "I like that (Brinkman)

is thinking about the original historical context."

Brinkman has adapted the "Tales" into modern English from its Middle English, to make them more accessible to contemporary audiences. He chose to perform the Wife of Bath's Tale, the Pardoner's Tale and the Miller's Tale, considered the most popular and entertaining of the collection.

"I don't think it's a coincidence that some of the 'Tales' are crowd pleasers," he said. "Chaucer was trying to show that not all stories are created equal."

The best crowd reaction, Brinkman said, comes when he performs multiple parts, reciting the back-and-forth dialogue among the characters.

Brinkman said he'd like to try rap adaptations of other, ancient literary works such as "Beowulf," "The Epic of Gilgamesh" or "The Odyssey."