

It's Miller Time! Baba Brinkman's Rap Adaptation of the *Miller's Tale*

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Essay

Chaucerians lucky enough to attend the July 2008 gathering of the New Chaucer Society in Swansea, Wales, had a chance to hear, in a pub setting, late one evening, Baba Brinkman's rap performance of three of the *Canterbury* stories—those of the Pardoner, the Wife of Bath, and the Miller. "It's Miller time," Brinkman announced when it was time for his hip-hop version of Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*. After a hasty gulp of beer, he launched into his version of the story of the duping of old John. Those still, after a long day, alert enough to pay close attention to Brinkman's rapid-rap lyrics probably had a sense that while some of the words rhymed, there were no couplets—at least as Chaucer used the couplet—and that the meter was way off. And while Brinkman's *Miller's Tale* had a recognizable Chaucerian plot, members of that audience found themselves listening to a tale about slightly unfamiliar characters taking part in a slightly unfamiliar sequence of events. Some bits that they expected to be there were not, and others that they were not expecting to be there were. I will say more about the differences between Geoffrey Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* and Baba Brinkman's, but first I offer quick answers to a couple of other questions: who is Baba Brinkman, how did he come to do a rap, or hip-hop, version of some of the *Canterbury Tales*, and what *is* rap poetry, anyhow?

Baba Brinkman is a young Canadian from Vancouver. He has been directly involved in reforesting British Columbia and has personally planted more than a million trees. He majored in English at Simon Fraser University (graduating in April, 2000), where he took an undergraduate Chaucer course. In that course he found himself both impressed and distressed by Chaucer—

impressed that some of the tales were so good, but distressed that the language and rhyme schemes were so archaic that the tales were accessible to only a few. In his senior year Brinkman wrote his honors thesis entitled "Competitive Poetics: A Comparison of Speaker/Audience Relationships in Hip-hop Lyrics and the *Canterbury Tales*." He also wrote a rap version of the *Knight's Tale* that he performed at a Canterbury festival in England after he graduated. He went on to get a master's degree in literature at the University of Victoria (graduating in April, 2003).

Brinkman sees Chaucer and hip-hop "as bookends representing the earliest and latest expressions of rhymed narrative verse in the English language" (Brinkman 13)¹ A central idea of his academic study of the relationship between Chaucer and modern hip-hop is that the competitive, contestive, and sometimes combative, spirit of Chaucer's multiple tellers who are motivated by a desire to win a poetry contest is also present in the hip-hop contest known as the "freestyle battle." He puts it this way in the long introduction to his book *The Rap Canterbury Tales*:

By definition, a freestyle is a rap that is unwritten and unrehearsed, composed by the rapper in the moment of performance, with rhymes that are improvised on beat and, when required, on topic. A freestyle battle is when two or more rappers compete in this way head to head, using punch lines, boasts, and insults to out-rhyme and outwit their opponents.

(13–14)

Brinkman says that the hip-hop freestyle battle is very like the poetic "quiting" or "getting even" that we find in the *Canterbury Tales*. Indeed, he says, "Chaucer seems to have designed his pilgrim storytelling contest around the exact same principles and guidelines that govern hip-hop's underground" (22).

What is rap poetry? Brinkman reminds us that rap rhymes rely

¹Brinkman's book includes four tales only, those of the Knight, the Miller, the Pardoner, and the Wife of Bath, without Chaucer's General Prologue or Chaucer's prologues to the individual tales. Brinkman does not number the lines of his version of the *Miller's Tale*, though he does for the facing-page Chaucerian Middle English version.

more on vowel sounds, usually referred to as assonance, than on consonants. For example, we find *listen, this, it, rich, licking, silver, live, in, kid* in the first three lines of the Brinkman *Miller's Tale*:

Listen to this tune: *it's* about a *rich* man
Licking a *silver* spoon, who *lived* in a mansion,
And rented a room to *this* young scholar *kid* [. . .]
(193, my italics)

Notice that there are in those lines a few more traditional rhymes—*tune, spoon, room*—but they are placed almost perversely in the middle of the lines, not at the ends where Chaucerians might have expected them.

Multi-syllabic rhymes and slant rhymes are especially appreciated in rap. In the next nine lines of his *Miller's Tale*, Brinkman rhymes the words (and word-clusters) *colleges, scholarships, preposterous, astrologist, Nicholas, limitless, libidinous, lick his lips, and licorice*. For continuity and context, I repeat the first three lines:

Listen to this tune: it's about a rich man
Licking a silver spoon, who lived in a mansion,
And rented a room to this young scholar kid,
Who'd been to the two most respected *colleges*
For logic and philosophy; he got *scholarships*,
But he still lived in poverty due to the *preposterous*
Cost of living; without a dollar he lived as an *astrologist*
And followed his dreams; his name was *Nicholas*,
And when it came to women his game was *limitless*.
The ladies he visited became *libidinous*
When he played his instruments; he'd just *lick his lips*
And sing a melody as sweet as *licorice*.
(193, my italics)

There is ample alliteration in rap—note the many “l” and “s” sounds above. I strongly suggest that readers listen to Brinkman performing the *Miller's Tale*.² When we do a prose-reading of the lines the meter in rap reads as if it were pretty irregular. It sounds

²Rap *Canterbury Tales* CDs can be ordered for around \$20 from Brinkman's website, www.babasword.com.

better when sung or spoken to music.

But let's move back to the storyline of Brinkman's *Miller's Tale*. First, if readers who expect a piece of poetry that calls itself the *Miller's Tale* to be a word-for-word, line-for-line, or even event-for-event replica of the story that Chaucer's drunken Miller told, they will be disappointed in Brinkman's rap rendition. To be sure, in broad outline the story is the same: old John is still cuckolded, Nicholas still makes lustful grabs at Alison, Absolon still kisses Alison's bottom and still scorches Nicholas's bottom, and Nicholas's cries of "Water, Water!" still cause John to cut the tub-rope and fall down and break his arm—well, his elbow—in Brinkman's version.

But there are many, many differences. Whereas Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* is 668 lines long, Brinkman's is 188 lines—less than a third as long. Lots of what Chaucer put in—such as the minor characters Robin, Gille, and Gerveys—Brinkman leaves out. The best way to show the nature of the reduction will be to have before us the first thirty-four lines of Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*³ the lines corresponding—very roughly indeed—to the twelve opening lines I quote above from Brinkman's version:

Whilom ther was dwellynge at Oxenford
A riche gnof, that gestes heeld to bord,
[commoner, took in boarders]
And of his craft he was a carpenter.
With hym ther was dwellynge a poure scoler,
Hadde lerned art, but al his fantasye
[learned the humanities]
Was turned for to lerne astrologye,
And koude a certeyn of conclusiouns,
[knew, processes]
To demen by interrogaciouns,
[discover, calculations]
If that if men asked hym in certain houres
Whan that men sholde have droghte or elles shoures,
[dry weather or else rain]

³Here I reproduce his line numbers, which coincide with lines 3187–3220 in Fragment I (from *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson).

In his version of the *Miller's Tale* Brinkman leaves out much that Chaucer put into those first thirty-four lines. For example, Brinkman does not tell us that John lives in Oxford, or that he is a carpenter who boards guests in his hostelry, or that he is a "gnof"—a churl or commoner. Brinkman does not say that people ask Nicholas about what will happen in the future, that he is as meek as a maiden, that his room is made aromatic by his use of sweet-smelling herbs, that Nicholas himself is sweet (lines 20, 32), or that he plays his psaltery sweetly (line 29). Brinkman says nothing of what astrological equipment and books are on the shelves at the head of Nicholas's bed, of what specific songs Nicholas sings, or how he supplements his income by getting support from his friends.

Brinkman not only ignores much that appears in the opening lines of Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, but he also adds much to his version that is not in Chaucer. Brinkman's *Miller's Tale* is not said to be set in any specific town, city, or even country. We might have assumed that it is set somewhere in medieval England, but the mention of "dollar" in Brinkman's line seven would seem to rule that out. The setting is apparently not even medieval. While there is a blacksmith shop nearby for Absolon to visit, several suggestions make it seem out of place in this tale. For example, we are told that Nicholas went to college on "scholarships" (193)—did they have scholarships in the middle ages?—and his fart makes a thunderous sound "like a motor revving" (241). There were no revving motors until the twentieth century.

Brinkman transforms John from a commoner who runs a hostelry into a member of the upper class who eats from a silver spoon and lives in a mansion. Brinkman makes Nicholas not a current student at Oxford but a man who *had been* at two respected colleges—not otherwise identified. Brinkman's Nicholas is poorer than his Chaucerian counterpart: rather than living on his income and his friends' donations, he has not even a dollar. He struggles to live on scholarships at a time when the cost of living is preposterously high. Brinkman's Nicholas follows his dreams, whatever that means, and is quite a favorite with women, who grow libidinous when he plays his unspecified instruments. Brinkman repeats the licorice simile, but instead of having Nicholas *be* as sweet as licorice, Brinkman has him *sing a melody* as sweet as licorice.

Moving beyond the opening lines of the *Miller's Tale*, we find many additional changes. John is still foolish and old for Brinkman, but he does not go off to Osenay (the spelling in Brinkman's Middle English version) to work on the church there. Later he builds a tub in his workshop, causing us to wonder why so rich and bejeweled a man would have a workshop, let alone know what to do in it. Of course, Chaucer mentions no workshop, and Nicholas orders three tubs, not one. Chaucer's John does not build any of the three tubs, but just acquires them. He does build the three ladders, but Brinkman makes no reference in his version of the story to any ladders, let alone who builds them. Brinkman spends several lines emphasizing old John's sexual disability, which is strongly contrasted with Nicholas's virility in dealing with their shared filly Alison. Chaucer does no more than hint at these contrasts. Even when he is closely following his Chaucerian source, Brinkman changes it. Chaucer's Nicholas is bold with Alison: "And prively he caughte hire by the queynte" (line 90); that becomes in Brinkman, "And he reached beneath her skirt with perverted intentions" (199).⁴

The hip-hop Alison is still young and sexy, though Brinkman describes her less in barnyard images than in bordello images: she paints herself a "slutty pink," has a "naughty stink," and has a mouth as sweet, not as a hoard of apples, but as "bubbly drink" (195). Unlike Chaucer's Alison, Brinkman's Alison likes having, displaying, and spending money. She enjoys going into the village because she "liked to shop wearing her husband's ring" (195). Chaucer makes no mention of Alison's shopping or of a wedding ring. Later, when Absolon famously asks for a kiss, Chaucer's Alison calls him "Jakke fool" (line 522) and threatens to throw a stone at him, but she is not said to be angry. In Brinkman's retelling of the *Miller's Tale*, however, Alison is "raging mad" at Absolon, laughs at him with "distainful wrath," and in her anger calls him a "disgraceful rat" (233).

⁴Brinkman defends his decision not to use what he takes as the modern vulgar descendant of "queynte" (191-192). He does not defend his decision to say that Nicholas grabs Alison with "perverted intentions" except to say that "[p]artially this was necessary to follow my rhyme scheme." The preceding four line-endings are *senses, against us, circumstances, and defenceless*. Few readers would see Nicholas's grab as "perverted."

Brinkman's Absolon will be familiar to those who know Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*: he is less aggressive than the bold Nicholas in his courtship of Alison, more the stylized serenading romantic who puts Alison on a pedestal. Brinkman makes explicit, however, what Chaucer merely hinted at regarding Absolon's sexuality: he becomes an "emasculate man" (203) who chants "pansy songs" (205) to Alison. Brinkman also makes up some unChaucerian information about Absolon, such as telling us that he had a propensity for "dancing drunk at taverns 'til his cash was gone" (203). Chaucer tells us that Absolon liked to dance (line 142) and that he often visited taverns (lines 148–50), but says nothing of drunkenness or spending all his cash.

I could go on about the way Brinkman has broken, then recast and reset, Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*. I could show all the little things he wrongly left out or wrongly put in. But I have no desire to do that. Why should I criticize a writer for retelling a story his own way? After all, we don't criticize Chaucer for simplifying his source for the *Knight's Tale*, which he shortened to about a quarter of the length of Boccaccio's more leisurely *Teseida*. We praise Chaucer for writing in the *Miller's Tale* a story far different from the one he found in the Middle Dutch *Heile of Beersele*—changing the rhyme scheme, changing the plot and the characters, and indeed changing the whole point of the story from its Middle Dutch "beware-of-dealing-with-prostitutes" message.

Why, then, are we so resistant when we now see a bold young writer named Baba Brinkman, who read the *Canterbury Tales* in one of our college Chaucer courses and wanted to share its pleasures with his own generation by performing a few of the stories in a quite different narrative and poetic format? Why do we get annoyed when we notice that in rewriting the story he eliminated what he saw as characters extraneous to his own purposes and changed the narrative so that it emphasized new things, such as John's wealth and class privilege?

It is interesting that in recasting the *Miller's Tale* for a twenty-first-century audience, Brinkman actually, and apparently quite unwittingly, took the tale back in some ways closer to Chaucer's own source. The Middle Dutch *Heile of Beersele* is about the same length as Brinkman's *Miller's Tale*. Like his version, it has no counterparts to Robin, Gille, or Gerveys (though one of Heile's visitors is a smith), has a prostitute as its female lead, and has only

one tub and no ladders. And the Middle Dutch *Heile of Beersesele*, like Brinkman's rap *Miller's Tale*, was apparently sung or accompanied by music:

Ghi hebt gehoert te menegher ure
Vertrecken scone avonture
Van messeliken dinghen,
Beide vedelen ende singhen
Ende somtijt spelen metter herpen.
(*Heile of Beersesele*, lines 1-5)

[You have often heard
Tell wonderful adventures
About all kinds of strange things
With accompaniment of the fiddle and singing
And sometimes with playing on the harp.]

In his book Brinkman presents his own rap text on the right-hand pages, with the Chaucerian original, complete with ample glosses of the Middle English, on the facing left-hand pages. Far from being ashamed of not being entirely faithful to what Chaucer actually wrote, Brinkman wants us to notice how fresh and original his own version is. While we might wish that he would not refer to his version as a "translation" in the passage below, his deviations from his Chaucerian source can most productively be viewed not as mistakes but as conscious alterations. He aims, he tells us in his introduction,

to offer an *interpretation* of the *Tales* for the general reader, with Chaucer's words accompanied by both the modern rap translations and the illustrations for the sake of accessibility and enjoyment, abandoning any pretence of perfect fidelity to the elusive original. As an interpretation, this book presents ideas and methods that will be and should be debated, but my intention has always been to follow the spirit of Chaucer's poetry, rather than the letter of any single historical text. [. . .] Chaucer was always mindful of the *experience* of a story, and this has been my guiding principle in the editing, adapting, and presentation of the *Tales* in this book.

Peter G. Beidler. "It's Miller 'Time! Baba Brinkman's Rap Adaptation of the *Miller's Tale*." *LATCH* 3 (2010): 134-150.

John with his *fractured* arm, *flat* on his *back*;
And Absolon's kiss, *smack dab* in the *crack*;
And Nicholas with the flesh of his *ass scabbed black*;
And Alison *sat back*, relaxed, and *laughed*,
The only one left with her rep *intact*;
And *that's* the end of *that*, as a *matter* of *fact*!
(Brinkman 245, my italics)

That is not Chaucer, of course, but so what? There is always room for one more adaptation of the wonderful tale of Alison and her three foolish admirers. Brinkman's was not the first; it will not be the last.

Well, *mister* and *miss*, *this is* the end of *this*;
Since it's time to end *this blissful missive*, I *will*!

Works Cited

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Heile of Beersle. Trans. Henk Aertsen. *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Vol. 2. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005. 266-267.

Appendix: Interview with Baba Brinkman

PB: HOW DID YOU get interested in the Canterbury Tales? If it was a college teacher who turned you on to Chaucer, what did he or she do to make those old stories come alive for you?

BB: *The professor's name was Sheila Roberts, and instead of having students give presentations on each text, she challenged us to form groups and dramatize them, everything from medieval Miracle plays to Canterbury Tales to books of Spenser's Faerie Queene. I took every course she taught for my final two years, and it was her Canterbury Tales course that really made me appreciate Chaucer's wit and insight into human nature, and also the dramatic potential of his stories as oral narratives.*

PB: WHY DID YOU work in rap rather than, say, a modern English prose translation or a translation into modern English iambic pentameter rhyming couplets—both of which would have been truer to Chaucer.

BB: One of Sheila's dramatization assignments was the Knight's Tale, and when the group was delegating tasks and choosing the director, actors, costume, etc, I volunteered to write the script. I started out with a prose translation, but after a page or so I felt like I was just suppressing everything glorious about Chaucer's poetry, the fun he has with form. But on the other hand rewriting it in modern iambic pentameter couplets still felt archaic and overly rigid to me. You say either of those would have been "truer to Chaucer", but I would argue that my use of rap was actually truer to Chaucer's historical moment, because when he wrote his iambic pentameter couplets in vernacular Middle English it would have struck his 14th century court audience as a revolutionary innovation in poetic form, a liberation from the narrow jog-trot cadence of the romance tetrameter and the clunking "rum, ram, ruf" of "geest" (an effect Chaucer was obviously aware of).

When I decided to use rap as my medium it wasn't just because I was "into" rap (which I was). It was mainly because I saw rap as the modern equivalent of the creative zeitgeist sparked by Chaucer's introduction of iambic pentameter into English letters, which mapped the native English speech rhythms onto a foreign metrical structure, producing an ideal marriage for the purpose of oral storytelling and (soon after) verse drama. Chaucer's chosen form happens to sound outdated to us now, but rap is still electrifying for us to listen to in the same way that Chaucer's poetry would have been to his audience; hence, I can't imagine any form truer to Chaucer than rap.

PB: YOU MADE SOME pretty sweeping changes in your rap retelling of the four tales. In doing so you are not retelling the old stories so much as you are reinventing them. Can you accurately say that what you came up with Chaucer's tales, or are they, rather, Brinkman's tales?

PB: *I feel I can still call them Chaucer's tales because my goal was to embody the speakers and retell the stories with as much fidelity as possible to the original narratives, themes, characters, irony, social commentary, etc, while still fulfilling the requirements of entertaining a contemporary live audience of non-academics. Hence, I chose to highlight the dramatic elements and humour, and gloss over many of the details which seemed of secondary importance (such as John's profession and the number of tubs in the Miller's Tale). If I had changed much more, I couldn't rightly say they were still Chaucer's tales, but if I had changed much less, I don't think I could have effectively entertained audiences at the Edinburgh Fringe, or thousands of high school kids, for that matter, so there was a balance to be struck, a balance Chaucer highlights often in the Canterbury Tales as that between "sentence" and "solaas." But I also had the perfect model for my adaptation process, which was the liberties Chaucer himself took with his sources. In fact, I started out trying to emulate his colloquializing adaptation process as precisely as possible. For instance, his Knight's Tale is approximately one fifth the length of Boccaccio's version, and my Knight's tale is almost exactly one fifth the length of Chaucer's.*

PB: DID YOU THINK of your task in redoing four of the tales in rap as more a linguistic or a narrative task? That is, was your main interest in the rap versification than in the story line?

BB: *My main interest in Chaucer was in his stories and his narrative voice, but my main interest in rap music has always been in the striking versification, the rhyme schemes and syncopated rhythms found in the lyrics. The challenge with this project was to accurately and effectively render the stories in this very complex form, which is actually much more demanding than heroic couplets. So really there's no separating the two components of the task, since it's easy to write nonsensical rap rhymes that are highly stylized and it's easy to write compelling narratives in prose, but it's not easy to write highly stylized rhyming verse that still follows a very specific narrative thread. Your question is like asking a hurdler whether he prefers the running or the jumping part of his job.*

PB: YOU HAVE PERFORMED your tales before a number of live audiences, many of them in high schools. Do you have evidence that some in those audiences go on to pick up the Chaucerian tales themselves, either in the original Middle English or in line-by-line modern translations?

BB: The best evidence I can give is testimonials from teachers, both at high schools and colleges, who have consistently reported the increased enthusiasm students express for Chaucer's poetry after they see me perform. I could quote some of them but it might seem gratuitous; however, references are available on request (lots of them).

PB: AFTER HAVING WORKED so closely with four of the tales, was your admiration for Chaucer enhanced or diminished? Why and how?

BB: Definitely I find my admiration for Chaucer enhanced the more closely I read him, and I did have to read the Canterbury Tales very closely and repeatedly for this project. More than anything else I was increasingly impressed with his insight into human nature, its fallibility and absurdity, but also amazed by his dispassion and suspension of judgment. It's very difficult to describe someone's shortcomings without moralizing, or to create tedious self important moralizing characters while still representing them sympathetically. I don't just feel like a disciple of Chaucer's literary abilities, I feel like I'm a disciple of his personality.

PB: DO YOU HAVE any plans to put more of the Canterbury stories into rap verses, or is that project finished? If the former, which tales? If the latter, why did you quit with only four, and why those four?

BB: Oddly enough, the crafting of the rap and the choice of those four tales has further parallels with the original. I didn't really choose the Knight's Tale to adapt; it was an assignment for a class, an assignment I tackled with zeal, and then afterwards I recognized the potential of this rap hybrid as a popular performance piece, even though the Knight's Tale wasn't the ideal tale for mass

consumption. Likewise, Chaucer apparently wrote his Knight's Tale before he conceived of the Canterbury Tales as a text, and it does quite stand out in its length and attention to detail. So once I had the one long tale adapted I set my sights on the three others that I thought were best suited for live performance, ie, the juiciest ones with the most sex and violence and humour and narrative cohesion. And once I had those three adapted I dropped the Knight's Tale from the live show (I haven't performed it since July of 2004). But I included it in the book and CD because it still works as part of a collection, even if it did somewhat encumber the live show when I used to perform it. And I have no intention of adapting more tales, because the four I've done suit my purpose perfectly. If I adapted more I'd either have to drop one of the current three from the live show, which would be a shame because they get a great response, or else I'd have to extend the length of my performance, and I think there's only so much performance poetry that people can endure in one sitting. But I would be happy to adapt more Tales on commission if someone else has an interest in expanding the collection.

PB: YOU HAVE DONE work recently on Darwin. Can you briefly describe that work? Is it also in rap? Can you give us three or four lines from your work on evolution?

BB: The Rap Guide to Evolution (*as its title suggests*) is also in rap, and it applies a very similar adaptation process to Darwin's theory of evolution. Of course, Darwin's theory doesn't provide the same obvious narrative elements that made Chaucer so ripe for the hip-hop treatment, but evolutionary psychology and mimetics offer some pretty tantalizing insights into human nature, so in the show I play various characters exploring the influence of evolution on their lives and worldviews, everything from gangsters to playboys to creationists to radical feminists. For instance, here's The Rap Guide to Evolution on eugenics:

*When we choose who to sleep with and reproduce
Our sexual choices affect the gene pool
So it's simple: all we need to do is refuse
To sleep with mean people, and things will improve!*

PB: WHAT LIES AHEAD what lies ahead for you?

BB: I'm really interested in hip-hop theatre as a medium, on finding ways to integrate live DJing, visuals, storytelling, acting, set design, music, etc. into a total performance experience, so that's where I'm trying to take this. The show I did on the Edinburgh Fringe the last two years with Dizraeli, The Rebel Cell, was a step in the right direction, but there's definitely a lot to learn, like acting for instance! I think I'll keep writing in rap, but I'd like to try to recapitulate the renaissance trajectory from the oral stories of Chaucer's pilgrims to the complex dramatic/poetic synthesis achieved by Shakespeare. You can't blame a guy for trying, right?