

**Title of Session:** Chaucer Does Rap!

**Moderator:** Larry Barton

**Guest Speaker:** Baba Brinkman

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**LarryBa:** Our discussion leader is Baba Brinkman from Vancouver

**BabaGst32:** Vancouver, BC

**LarryBa:** Perhaps we could briefly describe teaching assignments by way of intro

**BabaGst32:** a Canuck...

**DavidWe** laughs

**DavidWe** . o O ( Les Canadiens! )

**BJB2:** I teach remedial communication in Pennsylvania

**DavidWe:** I'm David Weksler. I'm a HelpDesk volunteer and I lead a math education and technology discussion here. I'm in northern New Jersey, near New York City

**LarryBa:** I'm 11th grade English, public high school

**LeoL:** <<drummer, currently teaching social studies in a special ed school in NJ

**BabaGst32:** I haven't taught any courses, but I completed my M.A. in medieval lit about four years ago and I've been performing and recording literary rap (lit-hop) since then

**DavidWe:** very cool!

**BJB2** agrees!

**LarryBa:** As moderator, I ask that you please let Baba make his comments until he is ready for further questions during the discussion.

**BJB2** sits on her hands

**LarryBa:** We'll probably be pretty informal

**LarryBa:** Baba, could you begin by describing your work?

**BabaGst32:** I saw many parallels between Chaucer's poetry and hip-hop when I was a grad student (and aspiring rapper), so I've been trying to find ways to combine them. The Rap Canterbury Tales is a one-man show I've been performing where I re-create and channel Chaucer's pilgrims as modern rappers...

**LarryBa** nodding

**BabaGst32:** I have toured the show for the past four years, and last year it was published by Canada's leading independent literary press, Talon Books, as a facing page translation. I have already released it as a CD

**DavidWe:** Where can we someone buy it, Baba?

**DavidWe** . o O ( Amazon? )

**BabaGst32:** And at this point I'm ready for any questions you might have. I am also interested to hear about what challenges you have encountered teaching Chaucer

**BabaGst32:** Amazon has the book and CD, or if you just want the music files you can get all of my albums from iTunes.

**BabaGst32:** Just search "baba brinkman"

**DavidWe:** cool, thanks

**LarryBa:** I'd like to hear some of these.

**BJB2:** I'm interested in hearing about how you overcome the bad rap rap has...especially gangsta rap

**BabaGst32:** My hope is that the book will make its way onto the curriculum for some Chaucer courses

**BabaGst32:** Mostly by not buying into the stereotype myself. I try to make my songs as conscious and entertaining as I can, using Chaucer's poetry as a model of this balance

**LarryBa:** What sorts of reactions do you get from your performances--from teachers and students?

**BabaGst32:** People do bring a lot of baggage to the table when it comes to rap, however, but I see this as an illusion of visibility. The most visible (highly publicized) rap also happens to be the most negative, misogynist, superficial, etc

**BJB2** nods

**BabaGst32:** But this is more a quality of mass media and popular culture than rap as an art form, just like Hollywood movies and thriller fiction novels and prime time tv

**DavidWe** likes Grand Master Flash

**BabaGst32:** The reaction to my show has been overwhelmingly positive so far both from popular audiences at festivals and from teachers who use me as a hook to capture the interest of their students

**LeoL:** what do the kids think?

**BabaGst32:** But of course I always have to overcome the initial skepticism that people will have

**BabaGst32:** Kids doubt that I will be a "real rapper" - they assume I will be a nerdy academic who is just aping hip hop as a gimmick

**BabaGst32:** I have been aware of this trap for as long as I've been rapping, so I have taken care to pay my dues in the hip hop community by collaborating with other rappers and by battling (a la 8 Miler)

**BJB2:** and once they hear you?

**BabaGst32:** Once they hear me they tend to be converted

**LarryBa** nods appreciatively

**LeoL:** got to have the street cred                      good

**DavidWe** smiles

**BabaGst32:** Sometimes after performing the Chaucer show they will be impressed but still won't believe I'm a rapper. They will take me for an actor with good memory and timing who managed to come up with one good thing

**BabaGst32:** So often they will challenge me to a battle in front of the class, if there's a kid there who thinks he can rap and show me up

**LarryBa:** Could you speak to the relevancy of Chaucer today?

**BabaGst32:** I love it when this happens, because I have been battling for years and I can always chew them up, which gets everyone else there instantly into my corner

**LeoL:** yeah

**LeoL:** great

**BabaGst32:** Chaucer's insight is profound when it comes to relationships

**BabaGst32:** This might be about the relationships between men and women, or between rich and poor

**BabaGst32:** his poetry shows a profound empathy and understanding with the perspectives of different people, which I think has a great deal to teach us today in a divided world

**BabaGst32:** That's the genius of the "Tales" - it's unity in diversity

**LarryBa:** Granted, but I'm confessing straight up that I don't teach Chaucer and that he isn't taught in my high school...

**LarryBa:** should we?

**BabaGst32:** Chaucer has also taught me a great deal about the relationship between a performer and the audience, which I see as the central theme of the "Tales" - this awareness is also crucial to the rapper's trade

**BabaGst32:** Well, if you want to make kids feel like literature is cool and sexy, you couldn't do much better than Chaucer

**BabaGst32:** Which other poet has to have much of his material censored by more conservative high schools?

**BabaGst32:** While still being upheld as the model of an innovator and literary genius?

**LarryBa** is intrigued

**BabaGst32:** I have been prohibited from performing the Miller's Tale many times because of its content

**LarryBa:** I'll bet!

**BabaGst32:** Although in England it is taught as part of the required A-level curriculum

**LarryBa:** Is that just patriotism?

**BabaGst32:** more like liberalism

**LarryBa:** Do you use modern translation?

**BabaGst32:** Because there's no reason to choose the rudest tale to celebrate their literary heritage

**BabaGst32:** I take the original middle English as a guide, and I translate it into my own words

**LarryBa:** OK

**BabaGst32:** My goal is to make each tale as comprehensible as possible to a modern audience, whether they know anything about Chaucer or not

**BabaGst32:** But for those who are familiar with the original, there are loads of hidden gems I have worked into the text, references and allusions

**BabaGst32:** This was Chaucer's own approach to literature as well

**LarryBa:** Quaint...

**BabaGst32:** Accessible to everyone, but also full of depth, complexity, social commentary, and irony, all of which are only accessible to those who take the time to look for it

**BabaGst32:** Not that I'm presuming to be on his level, but I certainly do take his philosophy of literature as my model

**LarryBa:** How much Chaucer would you like to see as "enough" in the modern school curriculum?

**DavidWe** tries to remember how much Chaucer he read in high school

**BabaGst32:** I don't think there's room for much more than an overview and a few Tales

**LarryBa:** we have the reality of standards to deal with... time constraints...

**BabaGst32:** I'm not trying to make him a centerpiece, but I think students should definitely have an awareness of him and what he achieved for literature

**LarryBa** agrees

**BabaGst32:** A strong case has been made for his role as the wellspring of much of what followed him in terms of English verse

**BabaGst32:** Shakespeare is the figurehead of English literature for a good reason, but he inherited much from Chaucer

**BabaGst32:** Chaucer inherited a great deal as well, but not from many English poets

**BabaGst32:** His genius was to take the best of the continental literature and the classics and to refashion it in a distinctively English way, which had never really been done

**LarryBa:** Chaucer does delineate character well

**BabaGst32:** Shakespeare achieved more, but he also had more to work with

**LeoL:** How much do you update the characters? Are they still medieval, or 2007?

**BabaGst32:** I don't make any references to modern pop culture in the Tales, if that's what you're asking

**BabaGst32:** I try to capture the same tone and setting as Chaucer himself

**LeoL:** I think that's what I'm asking....

**BabaGst32:** So for instance the Pardoner's Tale is just about three drunks at a bar who go on a quest to find death

**BabaGst32:** The context for the story could just as easily be today as six hundred years ago, and it could be adapted to most cultures without many core changes either

**LeoL:** right nice job

**BabaGst32:** The themes of drunkenness, arrogance, avarice, betrayal, etc, are all fairly universal and proliferate in rap music as well

**BabaGst32:** Whereas the Knight's Tale takes place in ancient Greece, so there is a setting in mythological time that I had to retain

**LeoL:** I'm seeing your credibility as a rapper as central to the whole tour

**LeoL:** which is good

**BabaGst32:** It's definitely the only reason I can get teenagers to listen to me when I lecture them

**LarryBa:** How young an audience can understand and appreciate what you're doing?

**BabaGst32:** I tend not to go any younger than high school age

**BabaGst32:** So twelve and up, but even twelve is pushing it a little

**LarryBa:** What is your ideal audience?

**LeoL:** Baba I have to go, but I look forward to reading the rest of the transcript

**BabaGst32:** There is a lot of range in maturity at that age. Sometimes they lap it up, but I had a girl break down and cry because of the subject matter during my tour of the UK last summer

**LeoL:** good luck and thanks

**LarryBa:** Bye, Leo

**BabaGst32:** My ideal audience is both Chaucer literate and pop culture literate

**LeoL:** bye all

**LeoL** left the room (signed off).

**BabaGst32:** I really didn't write this specifically for teenagers, but ironically that has become my biggest audience

ShirleyAn joined the room.

**LarryBa:** Hi, Shirley

**DavidWe** waves to Shirley

**BabaGst32:** The original motivation for me was to bring Chaucer to a popular audience again in the spirit of his original lyricism

**LarryBa:** How extensively do you perform?

**DavidWe** likes that idea

**BabaGst32:** I toured about twenty seven weeks in 2006

**BabaGst32:** I did performances in schools, colleges and festivals in Australia, Canada (including Quebec), England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and the USA (including the south)

**BabaGst32:** A good cross-section of the English-speaking world

**BabaGst32:** This year I am embarking on a similar tour

**LarryBa:** How does a school go about arranging for your services?

**BabaGst32:** Sometimes I have an agent, but other times they just contact me through my website ([www.babasword.com](http://www.babasword.com)) and ask about availability

**BabaGst32:** I'm based out of Vancouver so there are some limitations there

**BabaGst32:** What I've started to do is set up regional tours where I will make myself available to a given area for a given time frame, but it's all a bit of a juggle at the moment

**BabaGst32:** I'm performing in a high school in San Rafael, CA the day after tomorrow

**LarryBa:** How long and how much are you available to a typical school district when on tour?

**BJB2:** do you do residencies, Baba?

**BabaGst32:** I usually just try to make myself available to the extent that there is an interest and a budget to cover my costs

**BabaGst32:** I haven't done a residency yet, but that's something I'm definitely interested in for next year.

**BJB2:** cool

**BabaGst32:** If I could find a college that wanted to have me as an artist in residence for a year, that would mean I could be accessible to the whole region for that time

**DavidWe** smiles

**BabaGst32:** But I would have to have the freedom to travel still and work on other projects

**DavidWe** will check with some people at Swarthmore College

**BabaGst32:** I'd appreciate that - where is Swarthmore?

**DavidWe:** suburban Philadelphia

**BabaGst32:** Great, because that's definitely the part of the country I'd be interested in moving to for a bit

**DavidWe:** Friend of mine is a poet and one of the English Literature professors - she might be interested

**DavidWe:** Not sure who teaches Chaucer at the college, currently

**LarryBa:** Have you worked out of the Winnipeg area at all?

**BabaGst32:** I've had one expression of interest already from Washington University, but if I were to live there I might as well just be living in Vancouver

**BabaGst32:** No, I've actually never been to Winnipeg

**DavidWe** smiles

**BabaGst32:** I applied for the Fringe Festival there a few times, but never had any luck

**BabaGst32:** I will be performing in the Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto Fringe Festivals this summer

**LarryBa:** We're about 150 miles south from there

**BabaGst32:** Come see the show...

**LarryBa:** Toronto could be worth the trip!

**BabaGst32:** July 4-14

**LarryBa:** I'll put it on my calendar

**LarryBa:** Is there anything you'd like to tell us about the teaching of Chaucer, classroom observations on what works, what doesn't?

**BabaGst32:** I find pop culture references are a good way to give them a framework for approaching things.

**BabaGst32:** I try to find quotes from rappers or examples from movies that are thematically similar to whatever I'm talking about

**BabaGst32:** Like 50 Cent's motto: "Get Rich or Die Trying" which is a perfect summary of the main theme of the Pardoner's Tale

**BabaGst32:** The thing is, I haven't actually taken a Chaucer class in about five years

**BabaGst32:** all of the Chaucer classes I've been in since then are ones I've been leading, so I've really been able to set the agenda

**BabaGst32:** I was very lucky to have a series of brilliant English teachers that just got me more and more enthusiastic about the material, and that enthusiasm is infectious when I bring it to a performance

**BabaGst32:** But I can't say that Chaucer made a huge impression on me in high school

**LarryBa:** Chaucer has been squeezed out of the curriculum in many places. Any resources you recommend for re-instituting a program?

**BabaGst32:** A little book called "The Rap Canterbury Tales"...

**LarryBa** laughs

**DavidWe** takes a look at the clock on the wall

**BabaGst32:** It has the original Middle English printed on facing pages with the rap translation, and it's illustrated so you can see what's happening in each scene

**LarryBa:** Anything else you'd like to have recorded in the transcript?

**DavidWe:** Is there a web page with some information about you and the project, Baba?

**BabaGst32:** Just that everything I've talked about here is also touched on in the introduction to my book

**BabaGst32:** It's based on my masters thesis research and sums up my interpretation of Chaucer as well as a new theory of hip hop's place in the history of literature.

**BabaGst32:** And there are lots of gems for teachers to use bring Chaucer to life

**BabaGst32:** You can find information at my website: [www.babasword.com](http://www.babasword.com)

**DavidWe:** Thanks

**BabaGst32:** The book can be ordered online from amazon.com

**BabaGst32:** And my other rap songs are all available at the iTunes Music Store

**BJB2** is downloading the CDs from iTunes

**BabaGst32:** My most recent album is called "Lit-Hop"

**LarryBa:** Thanks so much for taking time to explain your program for us, Baba.

**LarryBa:** I'm ordering your book as we speak!

**DavidWe** smiles

**BabaGst32:** Thanks for inviting me. It's been enjoyable.

**BJB2** applauds loudly...this has been inspirational, Baba! Thanks!

**DavidWe:** Would you be interested in doing this again, Baba?

**DavidWe:** We would try to get a few more folks to show up

**BabaGst32:** Sure

**DavidWe** looks at BJ

**LarryBa:** Best wishes on your tour.

**BJB2** looks at Larry

**BabaGst32:** I just need proper notice so I can schedule it in

**LarryBa:** I'm in...

**DavidWe:** Good luck traveling to northern California

**BabaGst32:** Also, if any teachers are interested in bringing the performance to their school they should just contact me through the website

**DavidWe:** I can give you some places to go to in Berkeley, if you need to find some good coffee places

**BabaGst32:** Thanks!

**DavidWe** smiles

**BJB2:** Larry, you and Baba work on a date and I'll put it on the calendar

**DavidWe** thinks it is a plan

**LarryBa:** Sounds great!

**BabaGst32:** I'm going to go get some food now I think...

**DavidWe:** Thanks very much, Baba. Take care

**LarryBa:** Thanks, everyone.

**BJB2** waves goodnight

**BJB2:** Thanks, Larry

**DavidWe:** Good night folks

**DavidWe:** Thanks, Larry

**LarryBa:** Night!

