THE BROADSHEET

Issue VI, March 2014

If you could add one new course to the current English program, what would it be and why?

Here's what members of the Merrimack community had to say:

- "I think it'd be cool to have a class that focuses on breaking down modern bestsellers and why people like them. Then they could relate these books to books from the past." -*Greg Lingley, 2015*
- "I'd like to see a fantasy course because it'd be something different. Something with a magic aspect would fit in with the culture today." -*Micaela Trent, 2017*
- "I took an amazing English class in high school called "What Would Jane Do?" We studied works from the Victorian and Romantic periods written exclusively by females, such as the Bronte sisters and Jane Austen. I discovered some of my favorite authors in that class, and I would love to examine these texts at the college level!" -*Laura Stevens, 2014*
- "I would love a course that takes a popular book series or television show and looks at the themes, character development, and other literary elements. It would be a great way to draw non-majors to the English department." - *Megan Hathaway, 2013*

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Photo courtesy of Danielle Jones-Pruett

Brinkman meets with Dr. Branca's Chaucer in Popular Culture class prior to his performance.

Chaucer, as Told Through...Rap?:

Baba Brinkman Brings Down the (Writers)House with *The Canterbury Tales Remixed*

by Alison Leonard

"Yo!" With this singular hip-hop greeting, Baba Brinkman jumped head first into a dynamic rap interpretation of the medieval classic *Beowulf* during his performance at the Writers House on March 11. Brinkman had already rhymed, joked, and acted his way through a gripping and hilarious retelling of the epic *Gilgamesh*, as well as through four of the most provocative stories from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*.

Brinkman's unique blend of intellectual, literary subject-matter, pop-culture jokes and downright crude language at times, all executed in impeccable hip-hop style, kept the jam-packed audience of students, faculty and guests in awe. Never missing a beat, Brinkman positioned rhyming medieval allusions right alongside clever references to Kanye West and other celebrities. His visual aids ranged from illustrations created by his brother, Eric Brinkman, a former graffiti artist, to photo-shopped cartoons depicting Hugh Hefner and Scarlett Johansson.

Brinkman's unique performance was far from what one might expect to see at a show inspired by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Instead of presenting the complex middle English and obscure mythological references you might have plowed through in your high school English class, Brinkman brought medieval literature to life for today's generation by infusing classic themes and stories with the driving rhythms of hip-hop and rap music.

Brinkman, a Vancouver native living in New York, has been touring the world and performing as his primary job since 2004. The idea for Brinkman's *The Canterbury Tales Remixed* was actually born from the thesis he composed for his Masters in Medieval and Renaissance English Literature. In a private luncheon with Dr. Geraldine Branca's "Chaucer in Popular Culture" class before the show, Brinkman explained the creative, unorthodox leap he took when deciding to bridge

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An official publication of the Merrimack College English Department, The Broadsheet is published monthly during the academic calendar year. Its mission is to celebrate the English Department's role in promoting the literary arts on campus, to acknowledge the accomplishments of faculty and students, to profile students and alumni, and to create a forum in which issues relevant to English studies can be discussed.

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medieval literature with rap. "I was rebellious about this idea that I was into rap but it wasn't allowed to be relevant to my studies," he said. After some negotiation with his professors, Brinkman successfully defended a thesis about the links between medieval literature and hip-hop culture.

In 1999, Brinkman took his idea one step further and began to reconceive *The Canterbury Tales* as raps. However, his style of writing and performance evolved over the years, as he began to recognize the importance of including elements and allusions from popular culture in his tales to better appeal to the contemporary audience. In 2011, he revamped his earlier works, rewriting many of them completely and giving birth to *The Canterbury Tales Remixed*, which has been performed at countless colleges, as well as in Off-Broadway shows.

Interestingly, Brinkman's rap repertoire now also includes Darwin's theory of evolution. Despite the crude language often used in his *Canterbury Tales* performances (a true homage to the 'bawdy poet,' Chaucer himself), *The Rap Guide to Evolution* is Brinkman's most provocative endeavor yet. As Brinkman explained, "No one pickets outside the English department against Chaucer, but people do picket outside the Biology Department against Darwin." However, Brinkman is excited to use his unique talent to inspire important dialogue between people from all faiths and belief systems. When asked about his next project, Brinkman explained that he might venture further into the realms of science. His wife, a neuroscientist, has inspired him to learn about the theories of consciousness. "There may be a rap guide to consciousness in the works," he said.

As those of us in Dr. Branca's Chaucer class learned while meeting with him before the show, Brinkman is certainly capable of rapping about nearly anything. When signing copies of his book for some students in the class, he spontaneously composed individualized raps that rhymed with the students' names. His impressive knack for rhyming and rapping with flair will undoubtedly translate well to any subject he chooses, making everything from literature to science accessible, interesting, and fun.

No matter where his career takes him, Brinkman's passion for medieval literature and his original Chaucerian subject matter is evident. Dr. Branca complimented him on his success at keeping *The Canterbury Tales* relevant to a modern audience. "You're living evidence that Chaucer can survive and that his stories can survive," she said. But I think Baba himself summed up his performance and his unique endeavors best: "No one does anything like me."

- "I would love a course on women as protagonists in literature." - *Laura Dupre, 2015*
- "I wish there were more Victorian Literature courses offered. I love authors like Dickens and the Brontes, and I wish I got to read more by them while I was here." - *Corinne Keddie, 2014*
- "Probably a workshop class. Less structured than the current ones, with more freedom on what the students want to write about with more focus on what they write rather than what other people have written." - *Jaques Denault, 2017*
- "I think a great course would be something that compares the themes and characters of classic novels themes to popular books today." - *Christina Pinciaro, 2013*



Photo courtesy of Danielle Jones-Pruett

Baba Brinkmam performs at the Writers House



photos courtesy of Dr. Branca

Brinkman in discussion with Dr. Branca's Chaucer students over lunch.

Student Profile: Janelle Clark

by Alison Leonard



Junior Janelle Clarke exemplifies the type of student who takes advantage of all that the college experience has to offer. An English and Education double major, she also plans on declaring a Gender Studies minor. Clarke puts her writing and teaching skills to good use in the College's Writing Center, tutoring students from a variety of academic disciplines. She also serves as a Resident Advisor, and especially enjoys planning activities and making posters for her residents. In addition to her studies and her on-campus work, Clarke takes time out for socializing and staying active by participating in intramural volleyball teams. "It's very fun and low-pressure, and a great way to meet people," she says.

Clarke's obvious ambition will certainly help her in her post-graduation plans. A Springfield, MA native, she hopes to relocate either to Connecticut or Virginia and land a teaching position in an urban district, charter, or private school. "My ultimate dream job is to do educational reform at the state level," she explains. "I'm not a political buff or anything but I'd definitely like to help make some much needed changes."

When she's not teaching or assisting in educational reform, Clarke plans to continue traveling in her future. She's already been to Jamaica and England, as well as 15 states, and would love to visit another tropical island next. "I really hope I can continue to travel throughout my life," she says. "An item on my bucket list is to go bungee jumping, preferably off of a bridge with water below just in case!" Until then, she'll keep busy with her studies, jobs, going to the gym, and online shopping, a habit she calls a "lifestyle," which many of her fellow female students can likely understand!

Student Profile: Tony Rossetti

by Diana Le



While most high school students follow the status quo of enrolling at college immediately upon graduation, a handful of those don't, and even fewer return to school years later. However, Mark 'Tony' Rossetti (class of 2015) is one of the few who *did* return to school after taking a decade off experiencing more than a taste of the real world.

With a little more than one academic year left, the 32 year old can almost add "undergraduate degree" to his achievements. Despite being older than the rest of his classmates, however, Rossetti does not regret his decision to have waited before going back to school to pursue his Bachelor's. He says, "I knew that if I went to college at that [normal] age that I would probably not do very well because of my lack of direction," reflecting on his partying habits while trying to make it in life as a musician. He continues, "I figured if I was going to go to school that I should at least go for a major that would help me land a good career, and none of the subjects I wanted to study at the time (music, theater, or philosophy) promised a steady paycheck." He actually recommends that students take some time after high school and before college in order to gain life experiences, even if for a year or two.

When asked what prompted him to return to school now, Rossetti says that for years he worked "soul-sucking jobs that bathed me in morose, phosphorescent light over sixty hours each week," and once he got injured on the job in 2011, he knew it was time for a change. While collecting unemployment for wrongful termination after getting hurt at work, Rossetti, now with the strong sense of direction he'd lacked in his late teens and early twenties, and an upcoming fall wedding, happily attends Merrimack College, knowing he has dreams of one day teaching courses in English. Good humored and possessing a heart of gold, Tony would also love to become a writing globe-trotter, a passion he plans to follow during breaks from teaching, as opposed to waiting until retirement; Rossetti's reasoning is that "I want to be able to live my life while also having the time to enjoy it while I am young. We can always make money later; what cannot be made is time." Like the true educator he is destined to become, Rossetti stresses that *our most valuable commodity as humans is time*.

From Arthurian Britain to World Cinema: Professors Plunkett and Mahoney Talk about Upcoming Sabbatical





Photos courtesy of Kevin Salemme

During the 2014-2015 academic year, Professor Plunkett will be taking time off from teaching to travel and research, which will lead to the development of a new course for the English Department. We asked him what he hopes to accomplish on his sabbatical, how he became interested in film, and what he hopes his sabbatical will contribute to the English Department curriculum.

Interview conducted by Laura Stevens.

I will be on sabbatical leave the entire 2014-15 academic year, during which I'll travel to various film archives and libraries in France and Germany. Specifically, I will be conducting research at the Cinematheqe francaise in Paris, the Institut Lumiere in Lyon and the Filmhaus in Berlin. All three locations, in addition to their archival films and publications, function as "living museums," featuring a variety of lectures and retrospectives on both classic and contemporary cinema. In fact, I'm planning my visit to Berlin to coincide with the international film festival held there annually. My research at these various sites is part of my ongoing commitment to the teaching of film studies within the English department curriculum. This interest dates back nearly 20 years when I introduced a course in *Literature and Film* as part of my desire to integrate both cinematic and written texts in such a way as to reflect the increasing significance of visual literacy in both academia and the larger society. And as both the most popular and most eclectic art form of the modern and contemporary era, film enables us to expand the borders of "literary studies" in a number of complex and original directions. For example, how do films dealing with race, gender or war differ in thematic and stylistic terms from literary texts

Next year Professor Mahoney will also be taking her sabbatical, and generously agreed to tell us what her plans are, as well as a few details about her that most students are unaware of.

Interview conducted by Diana Le.

What do you plan to do when you're on sabbatical?

I've loved the tales of King Arthur ever since I stumbled across Tennyson's poem "Gareth and Lynette" as a child. Over the years, I've enjoyed teaching Arthurian texts in my Victorian literature classes at Merrimack, including an "Arthur in Victorian England" seminar. On my last sabbatical I took a very different approach to the material, beginning work on a young-adult novel trilogy set in Arthurian Britain. The first-person narrator is Carly, a sixteen-year-old potter who gets caught up in the complicated political intrigues of Camelot. I've mostly finished the revisions on the first book, so my sabbatical next spring will allow me to concentrate on expanding and revising the second novel, which is in draft form. Working on that second novel will also involve some interesting research—the sorcerer Merlin brings a potter from China to Camelot, so I'll be incorporating material on both medieval Chinese society and medieval Chinese pottery.

What career would you have pursued if not one in literature?

While I was working on my Ph.D. at the University of Kansas, a friend and I started writing comic book scripts in an attempt to get into the Marvel Comics internship program. Unfortunately, that happened to be the year the comic book industry crashed, leaving a quarter of the established comic-book writers and artists out of work.

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dealing with similar material? To what extent can 19th century fiction be seen as anticipating future cinematic technique and contemporary literature shaped by cinematic practices? What is the significance of the fact that greater interpretive freedom exists in literature than in film? How do we resist the authority of the director or recognize our own limits in a literary landscape?

Upon returning from sabbatical I will be developing a course in *World Cinema,* to be first taught in Spring 2016, and produce a scholarly paper dealing with the influence of European directors on Hollywood.

So I went back to studying for my doctoral exams. From what I remember of my scripts, I think that would have been the outcome anyway!

What's something students don't know about you?

Working on the Arthurian young-adult novels has involved me in some unusual activities. One was a weeklong pottery-throwing workshop in England. The pottery was located in Somerset, a few miles from my Camelot site, and the workshop used native clays and glazes and a wood- fired kiln—exactly as my heroine would have. I even got to throw a bowl on a duplicate of a medieval kickwheel. I also took three swordfighting (actual swordfighting, not history and theory) classes at the Higgins Armory in Worcester. In spite of the fact that I was competing against people the same age as most of my Merrimack students, I managed to hold my own. I'm still really pleased about that.

Upcoming Events

New England Shore Seminar Presentations, April 28 and 30, Writers House, 2-3 pm.

Sigma Tau Delta Induction Ceremony, Writers House, Thursday, April 24, 2014. Speakers: Colleen Michaels: Improbable Places Poetry Tour, and Jennifer Hanselman (fall 2013) on her attendance and presentation of her paper at this year's Sigma Tau Delta Conference held in Savannah, GA.



The New England Shore Seminar dines at The Bookstore Restaurant, Wellfleet Harbor



New England Shore students at Coast Guard Beach. Nauset Marsh in background.

New Courses for Fall 2014

Undead 18th Century: Origins of English Gothic Literature

Michael Jackson: Reading the King of Pop as Cultural Text

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